

Yuri Kitayama

Illustrator • Riv

13

*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*

Two Amethysts

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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Two Amethysts

"MMM!"

A sound of joy slipped out of Liselotte, who nodded enthusiastically as she beamed. Her lovely reaction made Rio smile softly.





*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*



Hiroaki yelled the moment they began, raising the Divine Arms longsword in his hand high in the air.

"I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS MOMENT! I'LL HAVE YOU FLEEING IN ONE SHOT WITH YAMATA NO OROCHI!"



Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom. He was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto in his previous life.



Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.



Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.



Latifa

A werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. She was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune in her previous life.



Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Ayase Miharuru

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.



Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.



Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under the protection of Rio, along with Miharuru and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION



Flora Beltrum

Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Currently taking action with the hero named Sakata Hiroaki.



Christina Beltrum

First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Worries about her little sister from the shadows.



Roanna Fontaine

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. Traveling with Flora as her attendant.



Sakata Hiroaki

A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.



Shigekura Rui

A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.



Alfred Emarle

Commander of the Beltrum Kingdom's Royal Guard. Possesses the title "King's Sword," which is given to the strongest person in the kingdom.



Liselotte Cretia

Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild.

She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.



Aria Governess

Liselotte's head attendant and an enchanted sword wielder. Has been friends with Celia since their academy days.



Sumeragi Satsuki

Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.



Charlotte Galarc

Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Monitors Satsuki but is also her friend.



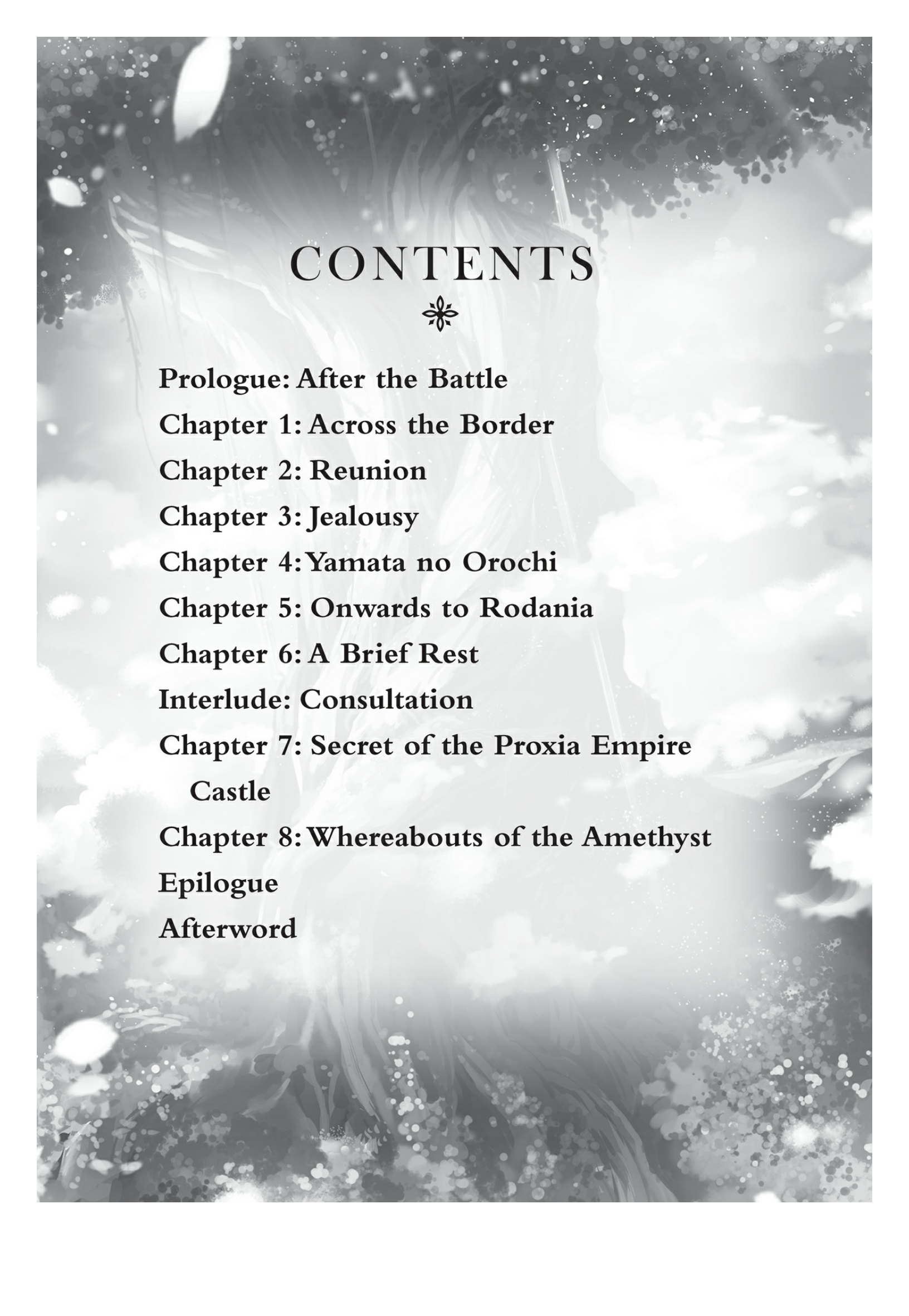
Sendo Takahisa

Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.



Lilianna Centostella

First Princess of the Centostella Kingdom. Currently at Takahisa's side in order to watch over him.



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Prologue: After the Battle

Rio grabbed Charles Arbor by the scruff of his neck and dragged him down the hill in front of an audience of 5,000 soldiers.

Christina bit down hard on her lip, maintaining a composed expression as she watched on intently. Before long, Rio was right beside her, throwing Charles onto the floor without a word.

“Ha... Haha...” Charles had completely lost his will to fight. He laughed dryly.

“Is everyone else okay?” Rio asked, mainly looking at Celia and Orphia. Along with Vanessa, the two had been on the ground when he arrived.

“Yup. I was only hit a little, so I’m fine,” Celia answered. “Vanessa was only knocked out, so it isn’t anything life-threatening. Orphia... She had her magic essence sealed with an enchanted collar, but I removed it with *Dispello*.”

Celia currently had her hand over Orphia’s stomach as she cast her healing magic. Right beside Orphia was the collar Charles had placed on her—a magic artifact commonly known as a sealing shackle.

Like its name implied, it had the effect of sealing magic essence. In other words, it made it impossible to release essence from the body. However, it would be more accurate to say it was an item that absorbed the essence of the wearer, activating a sorcery that severely disturbed essence control and prevented them from acting freely. This was why it could activate automatically as long as it had a source of essence to absorb.

“I’m fine. Cecilia’s healing magic is taking effect,” Orphia replied with an innocent smile.

Just then, Christina, who had been watching the battle while checking on Vanessa’s condition, approached Celia.

“Stay still, Professor. *Cura*.”

She placed her hand against Celia’s cheek and activated her healing magic to

ensure the area Charles struck didn't swell up. Celia had said that she was fine, but, that was probably because she had been too focused on treating Orphia to notice the state of her cheek.

"Thank you very much, Princess Christina." Celia was dazed, as though she hadn't noticed the pain until now.

"Not at all," Christina replied with a frown.

Meanwhile, Rio picked up the sealing shackles that were beside Orphia and approached Charles.

"Hahaha..."

He clasped them around Charles' neck. Charles showed no resistance, letting him do as he pleased. He merely laughed brokenly, like he was trying to escape from reality.

Rio frisked Charles and found two more sealing shackles in his possession, confiscating them. There was also a rope suitable for arrest, so he used it to restrain Charles' arms.

"Sara, Alma," Rio called out.

"Yes?" the two replied.

"Could the two of you disarm the people lying around and gather them together? Then tie them up with a rope or something. There may be some who still have the strength to resist, so be careful."

"Understood."

"Leave it to us!"

Sara and Alma both nodded firmly before moving into action immediately. The enemies that Rio swept earlier were lying all over the place.

"Rei, Kouta," Rio called out to the two boys standing around with nothing to do.

"Y-Yes?"

"Could you also help disarm the enemies and gather all their weapons in one place off to the side?"

“...Okay.”

Kouta and Rei looked a little nervous, but set off right away. After they left, Rio approached Alfred, who was unconscious.

I should cuff him twice, just in case...

If the wearer’s essence control was exceptional, it was possible for them to defy the effects of the sealing shackles and control their magic. It was difficult to use advanced magic in such a state, but Rio decided to use two sealing shackles in consideration of Alfred’s abilities. Afterwards, he tied his hands and feet together with rope, retrieved Alfred’s enchanted sword that had fallen to the ground, then left him there.

As for Rui...

Rio walked over to Rui and paused, a troubled look on his face. Should he restrain the hero, a disciple of the Six Wise Gods, as a prisoner? He was technically on friendly terms with him.

There was something else bothering him, too—the hesitation he felt from Rui during the earlier battle. When they exchanged those last few words before Rio knocked him unconscious, it almost seemed like Rui didn’t want to fight.

It seemed unlikely that Rui would resist and rage recklessly if he woke up to this decisive scenario. After a brief moment of thought, Rio carefully picked Rui up in his arms. In the end, he decided not to restrain him. If Rui still wanted to fight, he’d have to subdue him.

“Mmgh...” Rui regained consciousness, cracking his eyes open.

“Good morning,” Rio greeted a little awkwardly.

“Haruto... Ah, I see...” Rui said, immediately understanding the situation he was in.

“I don’t want to resort to violence, so will you be compliant?”

“Yes. I have no intention of resisting.” Rui nodded weakly at Rio’s question.

“...” Rio said nothing else as he headed back to Celia with Rui in his arms. Instead, Rui opened his mouth to say something first—and for some reason, quite happily: “It’s the first time in my life... That I faced someone head-on and

lost, that is.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t control myself and had to knock you unconscious.”

“No, it’s strangely refreshing. Come to think of it, it’s my first time being carried in a bridal style like this, too. At least from what I can remember.” Rui looked up at the radiant sunset and chuckled in delight.

“I’m sorry...”

“Please don’t say that. It’s comfortable.” Rui’s laughter drew Rio into chuckling along with him.

“I’m glad you were my opponent, Haruto. Truly...” Rui mumbled softly, looking up at the sky.

Chapter 1: Across the Border

Several minutes later, Rio woke Alfred and brought him over to where Rui and Charles were beside Christina. Celia was still treating Orphia's wound just to be sure she was healed, but Sara and Alma stood guard near Alfred in case anything happened. Meanwhile, Vanessa had also regained consciousness and was keeping a watchful eye over Charles' subordinates, along with Kouta and Rei.

Fortunately, no one that crossed swords with Rio had lost their lives. However, there were a considerable number of people who had been sent flying by his wind spirit arts and landed hard, resulting in severe injuries. Those people had been restrained, and the critically injured ones were allowed to be treated by the sorcerers.

"You've done it now..." Christina glared at Charles bitterly.

"What are you saying? Those should be my words. I knew you shouldn't have been allowed to attend that banquet. You managed to go behind my back and join forces with such a monster," Charles sneered weakly. His fighting spirit had been completely broken, but he seemed to have regained a little composure and could hold a proper conversation again. He shot a look of detest at Rio.

"Take back your words and apologize. Sir Amakawa is no monster," Christina ordered with a frown.

"Ha! Hahaha!" Charles cackled wildly, then lowered his voice to an irritated mumble. "If only... If only that monster weren't here..."

He hasn't realized it was Celia who connected Princess Christina to me?

Rio brushed off Charles' resentment with a blank expression and made a guess based on his words. Why Reiss hadn't explained that to Charles, he had no idea...

Christina seemed to be thinking the same thing, showing a glimpse of a doubt for a moment.

“We’re still within the borders of the Beltrum Kingdom right now. While we’ve apprehended the target, it wouldn’t be a good idea to linger about while surrounded by the enemy’s army. The faster we cross the border, the better, but what would you like to do?” Rio asked Christina.

He looked between Charles, his subordinates nearby, and the troops waiting on the hill. It was up to Christina to decide how to deal with them, and what action to take next.

Christina thought for a moment, but quickly made a decision. “We’ll bring Charles and Alfred with us as prisoners. We’ll investigate the details later.”

“Oh? Then what will happen to me?” Rui asked, shrugging his shoulders in jest.

“We cannot take the hero around as a prisoner. If you wish to follow us of your own will, that would be another matter, but...” Christina trailed off, yielding the right to choose to Rui. Taking a hero captive could be seen as a political attack, so she had to take a stance that thoroughly showed her lack of hostility.

“I see...” Rui looked at Kouta’s back somewhat sadly as he expressed his intent. “I shall return to the capital, then.”

Kouta avoided Rui’s gaze by keeping his face forward, never turning back once as he stood watch of their surroundings.

“Are you sure...?” Christina confirmed, also looking at Kouta’s back.

“Yes. I have a lover awaiting my return,” Rui nodded, answering clearly.

“Ngh...” Kouta’s back shook slightly. Rio and the others couldn’t see his expression from their position, but Rei was sighing in exasperation beside Kouta.

“Kouta,” Rui called. He didn’t respond.

Rui continued speaking to his back. “I knew why you left the castle. I knew, yet I tried to bring you back while dodging the subject, but... It really is true that I acted out of concern for you and Saiki. That’s why I came after you. I wanted to see your face and confirm whether you’d be okay outside of the castle.

Whether you'd be able to live well in this world from now on."

"..."

"If you tell me you'll be fine, I'll believe you. I won't try to force you to come back anymore. I'll believe that we can meet again someday and wait. You're an important friend to me, after all," Rui kept speaking in spite of Kouta's silence, when—

"I...!" Kouta raised his voice, keeping his trembling back facing them. His bitter words were not in the language of this world, but in Japanese.

"I've... I've always felt inferior to you. You transferred into our school from overseas, blessed with your looks and brains, and immediately became the school's favorite. You joined the same club as Akane and I and before I knew it, you were closer to my childhood friend than I was... I was jealous of you. I couldn't win against you in school, sports, or looks. Akane kept praising how amazing you are—each time, it filled me with so much jealousy, I almost hated you."

"Kouta..."

"But you were such a good person, treating me like a close friend—I couldn't hate you. Even when we wandered into this world unable to understand the language, you spent hours every day studying grammar and vocabulary to help us... Acting like we were the ones having a tough time when you had it the toughest out of all of us. That's why..." Kouta bit down on his lip.

Everyone watched his back silently. While they could understand Rui's words due to the automatic translation effect of his Divine Arms, most of them had no idea what Kouta was saying. Only Rui and Rei, who were Japanese, and Rio—who had Amakawa Haruto's memories within him—could understand Kouta's words.

However, it was clear even to those who couldn't understand Kouta's words that he was venting out his pent-up emotions.

"That's why it was only natural for Akane to fall in love with you. Then you fell in love with her, too. But I didn't want to accept that... I was going to go insane with envy if I stayed with you and Akane any longer. I hated myself for feeling

like that—it was pathetic. That's why I ran from you two. That's all..." Kouta touched upon the truth and clenched his fists tightly.

"I'm sorry..." Rui apologized with a distressed look.

"Don't be... It must have been hard for you, too. Akane's slow on the uptake, after all. She never realized my feelings. But you did, and that left you stuck between a rock and a hard place. I'm the one who should be sorry. Sorry, for leaving without a word—it was only natural for you to be worried." Kouta returned the apology, his face twisting as he held back his bitter emotions. It was at this point that he turned for the first time, facing Rui. *"I'll be fine. I'll do my best to live well outside the castle. So there's no need for your concern. Don't worry about me. One day, when I no longer feel inferior to you, I'll go see you guys... Thank you for thinking of me as a close friend all this time. You're a precious friend to me, too, Rui."*

"Yeah. We'll always be friends." Rui looked down, nodding his head.

"Look after Akane. Tell her I'll be fine."

"...All right."



With that final exchange, Kouta turned his back to Rui once more.

“Saiki, you take care too,” Rui said to Rei.

“Yeah. Well, I’ll just be drifting along,” Rei replied with a shrug.

“Right... By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask—did you dye your hair?” Rui looked at their hair and asked.

“Oh, this is...” Kouta exchanged looks with Rei, then trailed off. Rio had asked them to keep the details of the artifacts that changed their hair color a secret if possible.

Rio interrupted. “It isn’t common knowledge, but there’s a way to change it,” he explained.

“I see. No wonder the search teams were struggling so much, then.”

Rui smiled in understanding. “That aside, Haruto. Thank you. You may not know why I’m saying this, but I was able to stop hesitating thanks to my defeat. That’s why I was able to face Kouta properly. Kouta also turned back to look at me,” Rui said brightly, bowing his head deeply at Rio.

“I did nothing.” Rio shook his head with a gentle smile.

Rui turned to address Christina and the others, who had been waiting. “My apologies—the conversation dragged on because of me. You’re crossing the border before detouring to Rodania, right? I’ll accompany you to the hill. There’ll be less chance of the soldiers picking a fight if I’m there,” he suggested as he looked at the 5,000 soldiers waiting on the hill.

“That would be much appreciated.” Christina nodded at Rui. “Is Orphia doing okay?”

Orphia was still sitting on the ground as Celia cast her healing magic on her. “Yes, I’m fine now. Thank you very much, Cecilia,” Orphia thanked Celia, using her alias, then steadily stood up on her feet.

Yet Celia still looked worried. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Normally, Orphia should have required much more rest. But they couldn’t linger around here for much longer.

“I’ll carry her until we reach the border,” Rio offered, approaching Orphia.

“Huh...?” Orphia’s eyes widened in shock.

“It’s just in case. Just rest some more.”

Orphia was flustered, which was rare for her. “B-But... Is that really okay?”

“Could you please, Haruto?” Celia requested.

“Sure, leave it to me,” Rio nodded firmly. He walked over to Vanessa with Alfred’s sword in hand. “Vanessa, this is Alfred’s sword. It’d normally be most appropriate to hand it over to Her Highness, but its weight will be a burden while we’re moving. Could I ask you to hold onto it?”

Vanessa stared at Alfred’s sword and grasped it tightly. “Yes... I can do it. Thanks.”

Meanwhile, Sara and Alma had approached Orphia and were whispering to each other.

“Since he offered, you should just let him carry you.”

“Indeed. Or you may regret it later.”

The two of them were usually the ones being teased by Orphia, so they were delighted by this chance for revenge.

“S-Stop it, you two,” Orphia objected with a red face.

“Is something the matter here?” Rio returned and questioned the girls.

“No, nothing. Orphia just wants to be carried by you.”

“Please look after Orphia.”

Sara and Alma showed an impressive display of coordination to set Orphia up.

“Urgh... T-Then... If you’d please, Haruto...” Orphia blushed shyly, bowing her head at Rio.

“I understand. Then, if you’d excuse me.”

Rio picked up Orphia with ease, fitting her snugly into his arms. When she thought about it, this would be her first experience being carried by him. She knew Rio had strength enhancements activated to make carrying her simple,

but actually having him lift her so easily was a little embarrassing.

“...” Orphia ducked her face to hide how red it was.

“Let us depart, then,” Rio said to Christina. They left the knights and sorcerers disarmed and tied up a short distance away and headed for the hill towards Galarc’s border.



Rio’s group had reached the top of the hill. There were 5,000 soldiers before them, but they were clearly uncertain about how to deal with their approach. There was evident unrest among the troops—and since they had allowed Charles to be captured without doing a single thing, there was also some guilt involved.

“Looking at them now, there really are a lot of them...” Christina said as she looked around at the mass of troops.

They were currently at the border of the Galarc Kingdom, with which their alliance had gone completely cold. It was also relatively close to Marquess Rodan’s domain, which Duke Huguenot’s faction was using as their headquarters.

It was necessary to allocate an appropriate amount of military force for defense, so it was easy to surmise that a fair number of soldiers had been stationed nearby to begin with.

“They deployed as many of the search party as they could on enchanted ships, then they mobilized the majority of the troops in the walled cities. There’s approximately 5,000 of them,” Rui said.

Indeed, if they used enchanted ships, then it was possible to move several hundred people from Cleia in a day.

“I see. Still, I’m surprised there’s so much military force allocated towards the border. They must be aware that it looks like an act of provocation to Galarc.” Christina turned her cold gaze to Charles.

It’d be one thing if they had just stationed troops in the walled cities, but having such a large army at the border would unmistakably be seen as

provocation. Anyone would assume that they were preparing to invade the other kingdom.

They would have given the Galarc Kingdom some explanation when they mobilized all the troops, but there was no one foolish enough to believe anything under these circumstances. Moving the soldiers on this side of the border would cause Galarc to gather the troops on their side, so they had to make the soldiers retreat as soon as possible to clear up the misunderstanding. On top of that, they would need to meet with a representative of Galarc, explain everything, and apologize.

“Hah, you’re far too late for that. The relationship between Beltrum and Galarc became nonexistent long ago. And it was because of that strategy that we were able to catch Your Highness off guard. Haha,” Charles sneered, looking just a little bit smug about himself.

Indeed, common sense would normally cause them to remove that option from consideration, which was why taking said option had allowed Charles to outwit Christina. In that regard, it was a bold and daring—and cunningly effective—strategy.

“...” The temperature in Christina’s gaze dropped even further. The cold relations between Beltrum and Galarc was caused by none other than the Arbor faction’s measures.

“You seem to be feeling rather smug, but the one who devised that strategy wasn’t yourself, but Reiss, no?” Rio suddenly pointed out. The mysterious way Reiss had acted earlier had caused him to conclude that much.

“Wha...!” Charles’ eyes widened in shock.

“Looks like a bullseye,” Christina muttered.

“H-How rude! Sir Reiss and I thought of this plan together! And it would have worked, if not for you...!” Charles wailed with a red face, glaring at Rio.

“I see. To the ambassador of the Proxia Empire, Beltrum and Galarc’s relationship souring would only be in their favor. That’s why he didn’t care about the outcome. You were just being used this entire time, huh?” Rio said calmly, specifically choosing his words in order to provoke Charles.

Charles was stunned speechless, but soon flew into a rage. “W-What... What did you just say, you...?!”

However, for a brief moment, there was an uncertain expression in his eyes.

I was hoping to figure out Reiss’ objective, but judging from his reaction, Charles won’t know anything useful either, thought Rio.

He had left Reiss behind earlier because he didn’t have a second to lose, but there was no way he could turn back now—not that Reiss would still be there if he did. His only source of information was Charles, but it didn’t seem like he would be of much help.

That means Reiss offered himself as a diversion while planning for his own defeat from the beginning. It’s irritating how he has a mark on our movements when we don’t have a mark on his. He’s clearly ahead of us in stealth and scouting.

If there was one thing that hadn’t gone as Reiss planned, then it was Charles’ failure to capture Christina while he had been acting as a decoy. Or was it possible that Reiss had predicted Charles’ defeat as well...?

“I apologize for interrupting,” Rio said to Christina, dismissing the issue as hopeless.

“No, I was getting a little heated as well. I’ve calmed down thanks to you. We should hurry and have the soldiers return to their cities.”

“Then I shall go and talk to the soldiers,” Rui offered.

“That would be great... You have my gratitude,” Christina said in thanks.

While they could probably do something about the soldiers by threatening the commanding officer Charles, there was no telling whether they would all be cooperative. There was a fear things could grow complicated if they said or demanded anything inappropriate.

In that respect, Rui was not a commander, but a hero. As long as the Six Wise Gods were being politically used as the state religion, there was no way for the soldiers to make light of the words of a disciple of god. He had far more influence than their order to pursue Christina.

“I’ll be off, then.”

Rui walked the last several dozen meters to the army waiting ahead. Once he was within ten meters, a high ranking officer rushed out from the middle of the troops to speak to Rui. Rui looked back to point at Rio and the others as he explained things to the officer.

Namely, that they had been completely defeated and Charles and Alfred had been taken prisoner. They had no choice but to see Christina and her party off, so the troops should retreat here as well.

A single swordsman had wiped out the elite knights and sorcerers, overwhelmed the kingdom’s strongest swordsman and hero, and left 5,000 soldiers in awe, unable to do anything as they watched their commander-in-chief be taken away.

“Guh...”

Finally accepting the unprecedented defeat as a reality, the officer began to bite down on his lip. His head would definitely go flying at this rate. However, several minutes after that, Rui turned on his heel and returned to Rio.

The officer was also gathering together the soldiers around him. Then, the troops blocking the road suddenly started swarming to the sides, creating a path down the middle.

“Please, go ahead.”

Rui gestured to the hill once he returned, encouraging them to depart.

“Thank you very much,” Christina said respectfully.

“Don’t worry about it,” Rui shook his head, then called out the names of the two prisoners. “Charles, Alfred.”

“...”

Unable to say anything from his bitterness, Charles merely looked at Rui.

“Yes?” Alfred replied calmly.

“I don’t know how much I’ll be able to do, but you can leave the rest to me. I’ll make sure to report to those in the capital about what happened here. I

swear I won't allow anyone to take responsibility with their lives," Rui said to the two of them.

"Guh..." Charles grimaced.

"Please do so," Alfred bowed his head deeply.

"I will. I'll pray that we may meet again someday. Farewell," Rui said to Alfred.

"Now go," Vanessa pressed Alfred and Charles.

"All right," Alfred nodded, and started walking. Charles looked unhappy about being ordered around, but begrudgingly started walking after Vanessa poked him in the back with her scabbard.

The two of them had their magic essence sealed and hands cuffed, so they couldn't resist. The soldiers that had stepped aside for them were watching them, making their shame even more apparent. There was nothing more humiliating to Charles, who had a lot of pride.

"Damn it... Damn it all..." Charles muttered, looking around at the soldiers that didn't save him before ducking his head. He increased his pace, fearfully avoiding their gazes. Sara, Christina, Celia, Kouta, and Rei followed behind him.

"See you, Kouta. You take care too, Saiki. Let's meet again," Rui called out to Kouta and Rei.

"Yeah," Kouta nodded, giving a short reply.

"Later," Rei said, waving his hand lightly before following Christina and the others.

Rui then called out to Rio, who was behind Kouta and Rei. "Haruto."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember what I said to you when we parted in Galarc?"

"Yes. In the garden, right?" Rio recalled his farewell with Rui at the Galarc castle.

Rui looked directly at Rio. "If we have a chance to meet again, I'd like to talk to you as friends. We weren't able to fulfill that promise this time, but I hope we'll be able to do so next time."

“Yes,” Rio acknowledged in agreement.

“Hopefully we can avoid meeting on the battlefield again. I don’t have enough lives to take you on when you’re fighting seriously—if we have to fight, I’d much rather be on the same side,” Rui joked a little, but finished off his words seriously.

“I wouldn’t want to fight you again, either. Especially in long-ranged combat... You have a brilliant sniping arm,” Rio said in praise.

“I wasn’t able to land a single shot on you in the end, though.”

“If you were able to fight from a distance without any disturbance, the result may have differed.”

“I doubt that...” Rui closed his eyes, looking unsure. Then he raised his head and looked at the backs of Kouta and Rei. “Haruto, if Kouta and Saiki are ever in trouble... If it’s not too much trouble, could you help them out where you can? They’re important friends of mine. That’s why I’d like to entrust them to you, someone I consider an important friend I made in this world. If you could be there for them when they’re in a pinch, that would be enough.”

“I understand. If they’re ever truly in trouble, I shall assist to the best of my ability.”

“Thank you... While I doubt this’ll ever be the case, I swear I’ll be there for you if you’re ever in trouble as well—as your friend.”

“Then, I too.”

The two of them exchanged gentle smiles. Rui said nothing more and started in the opposite direction to Rio.

“Shall we go?” Rio smiled softly as he spoke to Orphia in his arms and Alma who was serving as the rear guard. Thus, they set off after Celia and the others.



Rio and the others had arrived at a fortress acting as a checkpoint on the Galarc side of the road connecting Beltrum and Galarc Kingdom. Incidentally, the walled city they last visited on the Beltrum side acted as the final checkpoint for the Beltrum Kingdom.

The gate of the fortress that was normally open was firmly shut, and several soldiers were waiting before the gate.

“Halt!” they yelled, clearly wary of their approach.

“Let’s stop. I shall handle this.” Everyone came to a halt at Rio’s order.

Incidentally, everyone except Celia had removed their hair-changing artifacts and lowered their hoods on the way here. Now that they had shaken off the search party, there was no need for the disguises anymore. Only Celia’s disguise couldn’t be removed because her former fiancé, Charles, was right nearby. Even if she were to reveal herself to him someday, doing so now could turn into trouble, so she kept her disguise on.

One of the gatekeepers glared at them, asking with a stern glance towards Charles and Alfred, “Who are you people? Those two over there... Are they knights of Beltrum?”

“Orphia, may I let you down here?”

“Yes.”

Rio set Orphia down from the bridal carry he had her in. He had secretly been casting healing spirit arts while they were moving, so she had completely healed long ago, but she couldn’t find the right opportunity to speak up while they were on the road. When her feet touched the ground for the first time in tens of minutes, she looked a little sad.

At any rate, Rio walked towards the soldiers approaching them and revealed his identity. “My name is Haruto Amakawa, honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom. I’d like to request access to the kingdom through the checkpoint, but I also wish to clarify the situation that occurred at the border with the Beltrum army. May I speak to the person in charge here?”

The soldier’s expression immediately changed. “The... The honorary knight?! F-Forgive my insolence! May I see some proof of identity?” he asked respectfully.

“I have this insignia bestowed upon me by His Majesty. Will that do?” Rio flipped back his overcoat and moved even closer towards the gatekeepers, showing them the insignia he had attached to his collar.

“I-Indeed, this is the crest of the royal family... There’s no issue at all! Someone in charge will be out soon, so please wait over here for a moment,” the gatekeeper said, gulping nervously. He then turned to his subordinate to give an order. “You go inside and immediately explain the situation.”

“Y-Yes sir!” The soldier that received the order ran off in a fluster, entering the fortress through a small door.

“I shall return to my companions in the meantime, then.” Rio turned on his heel and returned to where Celia and the others were, roughly ten meters away from the gatekeeper. They waited there for a while.

“Hey, is an honorary knight that important? Captain looked really nervous about it, but how’s he any different to a regular knight?”

“You fool! An honorary knight is equal to an earl in rank. Our heads will go flying if you show any disrespect. Consider them that important.”

“R-Right...”

And so forth, the soldiers whispered to each other. Furthermore, because Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Christina—all young and lovely girls—were standing in a row...

“Say, have you ever seen girls that cute before?”

“Nope, never.”

“They have to be noblewomen. Born and raised in different worlds to us.”

“Hah! Nobility must be amazing.”

The soldiers exchanged banter with each other, glancing over with nearly reserved looks of curiosity. Several minutes later, the gate to the fortress slowly started to creak open.

“Looks like the talks went well,” Rio said as he looked at the gate.

The fact it was the gate opening instead of the small door was a good sign.

In the end, having a title is kind of convenient, huh...

The gate opened enough for the interior of the fortress to be seen. Several people were standing on the other side—it was the daughter of the Count

Cretia family and the president of the Ricca Guild, Liselotte Cretia.

“Liselotte...?” Rio blinked. This location was certainly within the Duke Cretia domain, and fairly close to Amande, so it wasn’t strange for her to be here, he thought.

On top of that, right beside Liselotte was Flora, Duke Huguenot, Roanna, and Sakata Hiroaki. Christina spotted Flora as well; her eyes widened faintly, exposing her surprise. The same applied for Flora, and the two of them looked at each other with burning, amethyst-like eyes.

“Flora...”

“S... Sister...?”

The two spoke slowly, calling for each other as if to confirm their presence. Thus, the reunion of Beltrum Kingdom’s first and second princesses had occurred in an unexpected location.

Chapter 2: Reunion

Flora stared at her sister until she was unable to contain herself and broke into a run. “Christina...!”

“...” Christina also tried to step towards Flora, but she looked a little hesitant and held her ground; she seemed to be feeling guilty for giving her the cold shoulder at the banquet in the Galarc Kingdom. However, such matters were apparently trivial to Flora. Once she reached Christina, Flora threw herself around her.

“Why are you here? Why are you with Sir Haruto...?” Flora cocked her head in confusion at the sight of Christina and Rio together. Then, she noticed Charles and Alfred, who were restrained. “And why...”

“How foolish... What were you going to do if I had arrived here to deceive you? Have you forgotten how I treated you at the banquet?” Christina whispered in her ear, looking a little ashamed but happy nevertheless.

“Ah...” Flora let out an uncertain sound, weakening her grip around her sister. Her body had moved reflexively when she saw Christina together with Rio, but thinking about it calmly, that may have been a rash action.

“It’s all right. Everything’s all right now. I won’t leave you alone anymore.” Christina hugged her little sister back dearly.

That alone was enough to push Flora to the verge of tears. “Christina...”

“It must have been painful for you. I’m so sorry...” Christina shamefully muttered in apology.



“No, not at all.” Flora wiped her tears with her hands. Everyone else watched on with pleasant smiles, with the exception of one.

“Ah, I get that the two of you reuniting is a good thing, but I don’t quite get the situation here? Why is Haruto with Christina? And with so many other women...” Hiroaki said. With his position as the hero, he was the only one that could interrupt the reunion of the princesses without any hesitation. His eyes had widened in deep interest at the sight of Sara and the other girls’ faces, but he soon spotted the faces of Kouta and Rei—who were clearly from his homeland—and blinked at them in confusion. “Oh, are you two Japanese? You don’t seem like heroes.”

Kouta and Rei exchanged looks, then nodded awkwardly. “Well, yeah.”

“Hmm...” Hiroaki hummed without much interest. He then turned to the girls and greeted them brightly, directly addressing them. “Ah, I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Hiroaki Sakata. I’m what you would call a hero, I suppose.”

“...”

Sara and the girls looked a little confused, having not expected Hiroaki to introduce himself to them directly. Hiroaki’s succession of questions had completely killed the conversation. No one was sure how to proceed under such a situation, so an awkward silence hung in the air.

“Why don’t we head inside for now? I’ll prepare somewhere we can settle down and talk, so we can continue this there,” Liselotte suggested.

Thus, Rio and the others entered the fortress.



Ten minutes later, in a meeting room inside the fortress, Rio and Liselotte’s respective parties met face to face. Everyone Rio traveled with on the way here sat on his side, while Duke Huguenot and Flora’s group sat on Liselotte’s side. Also in the room was Aria, Liselotte’s right-hand woman and attendant. Vanessa was also standing behind Christina instead of sitting in a chair.

Incidentally, Charles and Alfred were brought to the fortress prison on their way to the meeting room, to be confined there temporarily.

“Now, let us get right down to business. I believe the first thing we should share is our reasons for coming to this fortress. Does everyone agree?” Liselotte checked, looking around the room.

“Yes, I agree. Though I can pretty much anticipate Lady Liselotte’s reasons for being here,” Christina said.

As the daughter of the Cretia family and governess of the nearby city of Amande, it was fairly obvious that Liselotte had come to this fortress to investigate the movements of the Beltrum army near the border. What wasn’t so clear was why Flora, Hiroaki, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot were there as well. Christina had assumed they were in Rodania.

“As you may have presumed, the reason why I’m here is due to the large-scale movements of the Beltrum Kingdom’s army near the border. Princess Flora and the others just so happened to be with me when I received the notice... When I told them what was going on, they stated their desire to accompany me. I brought them here on my enchanted ship under the agreement that they would immediately return to Amande once we confirmed the situation,” Liselotte explained.

“Did Flora and the others have business in Amande?” Christina wondered, looking at Flora and Duke Huguenot.

Hiroaki took the initiative to answer Christina first. “Nope. We were confined in Galarc’s capital for ages after the end of the banquet, but then we thought we’d greet Liselotte on our way back to Rodania. Since we weren’t able to say farewell properly at the banquet.”

Because his goal in visiting Amande was to make a pass at Liselotte and hopefully bring up the topic of engagement, he looked a little guilty about his answer.

The Beltrum army appeared as soon as we got to Amande, so I haven’t been able to talk to Liselotte properly yet... Ugh, can’t those guys read the room? Tch, Hiroaki thought to himself.

“I see... I understand your situation now. Then I shall explain why we’re here next—is it all right if I do the talking, Sir Amakawa?” Christina asked Rio. The way she checked with him before anything else showed how much respect she

had for him.

They didn't have any kind of special relationship at the banquet, so those seated opposite them were extremely curious as to how they ended up this way.

"Yes, of course."

"Then... I'd like to ask that you all keep what I say here confidential. Of course, I will report to Galarc's King Francois myself at a later date, but the matters do concern the internal affairs of my kingdom," Christina said, mainly looking at Liselotte.

"I understand. Shall I have my attendant step out, then?" Liselotte nodded, turning to face Aria behind her.

"Your Highness, if I may speak up..." Celia interrupted. The others could tell she was a young and beautiful woman, even with her hood covering her face. Since she was the only one who was wearing a hood in the room, the attention gathered on her was particularly curious.

"What is it?"

"It would be more convenient to have her present when you explain my circumstances later, so if I may be so bold as to suggest she remain present? I can explain the situation myself in a moment," Celia said, looking at Aria.

"I see. In that case, she may remain present," Christina agreed readily.

"I agree."

Aria and Liselotte both looked a little curious at the sudden spotlight on Aria, but they agreed without any particular objection.

"Then, to get straight to the point: everything started when Vanessa and I fled from Beltrum's capital, with the assistance of Count Claire. We tried to head for Rodania, where Flora was, by enchanted ship. These two boys were stowed away on that ship—they're Rei Saiki and Kouta Murakumo, friends of the hero, Sir Rui Shigekura. We ended up taking them along with us, but I'll omit the details of that for now," Christina explained.

"Thanks to the Count's assistance, we were able to make it to Cleia smoothly,

but the problems began there. Duke Arbor discovered I had fled and immediately dispatched a search party led by Charles. We were able to quickly conceal ourselves in a secret room in the Count's estate, but our movements from there were sealed. It was only a matter of time before we were discovered—which was when we met Sir Amakawa.”

“Ah... Wait, hold on. Isn't that odd? You were blocked from leaving the Claire estate, right? And you were hiding in a secret room to avoid the search party, so how did he end up in that room?” Hiroaki interrupted.

“That's because... May I leave the explanation of that to you?” Christina asked, looking at Celia.

“Yes,” Celia nodded, then removed her hood for the first time. She had secretly removed the artifact that changed her hair color in the corridor after Charles and Alfred were taken away.

“Professor... Celia?”

Sure enough, Flora opened her mouth in shock. Roanna, who was also a student of the same academy, had widened eyes too. Even Duke Huguenot was blinking in shock.

“Hey hey, who is that? Someone you know, Flora?” Hiroaki asked, his eyes sparkling.

“I'm Celia Claire. Daughter of Count Claire, and a former instructor to Princess Christina, Princess Flora, and Miss Roanna at the academy. Aria over there is an old friend of mine.” Celia introduced herself, then looked at Aria as she said her name.

“...” As an attendant, Aria didn't say anything, but her wide eyes met Celia's before her mouth tugged upwards in a faint smile.

That's a shock, thought Liselotte. Aria had told her of Celia before, so she knew they were friends, but she never imagined they would meet in this way.

“Ah, and what do you mean by 'professor'? You only look about as old as Flora and Roanna, or perhaps even younger,” Hiroaki said, staring at Celia closely.

“Thank you. But I’m twenty-one years old,” Celia said, giving her age a little shyly.

“W-What?! T-Twenty-one?! That’s older than me! Are you legal jailbait or something?!” Hiroaki yelled, standing up and leaning forward spontaneously.

“Gah...” Kouta and Rei looked a little disgusted at Hiroaki’s words. It was the moment they realized he was the polar opposite of the gentlemanly Rui, the hero they knew.

“Legal... jailbait?” Christina and Celia had puzzled expressions, unsure of the meaning.

We’re not going anywhere like this. Hiroaki’s continuous statements, which were made with no consideration of time and place, were giving Liselotte a headache. With no other choice, she raised her hand. “Umm...”

Everybody’s attention gathered on Liselotte.

“I happened to be present at the ceremony, but wasn’t Lady Celia abducted from her wedding with Charles Arbor? Why is she here... unless...?” Liselotte trailed off and looked at Rio with a gasp. He was the first she thought of with the ability to bypass the heavy security at the venue.

“Yes. I abducted her,” Rio nodded.

“I see. Indeed, if it was you...” Liselotte hummed in understanding.

“Sir Amakawa lent his strength in order to reduce the influence of Duke Arbor’s faction,” Christina stressed, speaking as though she had been the one who ordered Rio to abduct Celia.

This was the story they had discussed in advance for when they arrived at Rodania. Christina had made sure to warn Kouta and Rei against telling others before making this decision. That being said, it wasn’t entirely a lie.

Sir Amakawa lent his strength in order to reduce the influence of Duke Arbor’s faction, at Professor Celia’s request—the omitted information was that it had been for Celia, not Christina.

Christina had given her consent to legalize Rio’s actions so that the abduction wouldn’t be viewed as a problem, but that wouldn’t stop anyone who wanted

to criticize Rio and Celia for not having Christina's approval at the time of the act. In order to avoid this, they purposefully chose misleading words to make it seem like the act had been at the request of Christina herself.

The quick-witted Liselotte and Duke Huguenot instantly picked up on what happened and had looks of understanding on their faces.

"Huh...?"

However, only Flora's reaction showed confusion.

"Is something the matter, Flora?" Christina checked.

"Ah, no, it's just... Were you acquainted with Sir Haruto before, Christina?" Flora looked at Rio's expression as she questioned her older sister.

Christina paused. "We weren't directly acquainted, and there was a fair bit of danger involved in the process, so I'm afraid the events surrounding that are a secret. I can't tell you," she said, dodging the question.

"I understand..." Flora frowned with a frustrated look, staring at Christina.

Duke Huguenot took advantage of the lull in conversation to look at Celia and Rio. "If I may confirm, were you with Haruto this entire time, Celia?" he asked.

"Yes. She was present during the attack on Amande as well, under the name of Cecilia. Though I tried to avoid bringing her in front of everyone as much as possible," Rio answered. This made Liselotte and Duke Huguenot's eyes widen.

"Hmm... Ah! Right, she was there at that time! Wait, but her hair's different! Even if she changed her hairstyle by tying it, how did she have blonde hair?" Hiroaki had been staring closely at Celia, but after a pause he pointed at her in excitement and started ranting. Her presence at Amande seemed to have been the hint that helped him finally remember her.

"I used a method to change my hair color."

"Heh... Well, I'm surprised. It's a pretty dramatic change," Hiroaki said in awe. Right now, Celia didn't have her hair tied up on one side like the last time she had been in Amande—her hair was down instead. Combined with the different hair color, her impression had changed quite a lot.

"We were pretty flustered when the monsters attacked Amande and I had no

choice but to visit Liselotte's estate..." Celia looked back on that time and smiled at the memory.

"I didn't realize at all... But..." Flora muttered, looking at Rio as though understanding something.

"Neither did I," Roanna nodded in amazement.

"You didn't notice either, right Aria?" Liselotte asked Celia's old friend.

"Embarrassing as it is to admit, no. I did feel a sense of déjà vu from her when we said our goodbyes, but... We didn't see much of each other at the estate, and I never imagined she could change her hair color so naturally. If I had more opportunities to listen to her voice, I may have noticed," Aria replied, analyzing the reasons why she didn't realize it before.

"I see... Because there's no way to naturally change your hair color. Or rather, no way that one would normally think of. It would be an extremely effective form of disguise in a society unaware of that possibility," Liselotte turned to Celia and said with great awe.

"Indeed. That's why we ask that you keep the existence of such methods a secret. Since it was an emergency, I had Her Highness and the others change their hair color while we were fleeing Cleia, but they don't know the exact details of the method themselves," Rio said, putting a stop to any prying before it could occur.

"I see... I'm curious, but it can't be helped. I shall comply," Liselotte agreed with a wry smile. Like she said, she was curious about it, but instantly determined that it wasn't information worth being unreasonable towards Rio for.

"Umm... Sir Haruto, could you be using that method to change your hair color as well?" Flora asked Rio nervously.

"What are you saying, Flora? Were you not listening to the conversation just now? We just said that kind of prying was completely forbidden," Christina said, shutting her down bluntly. Flora's face paled, Christina's words making her rethink her impulsive question.

"I apologize for her rudeness, Sir Amakawa," Christina said with a sigh.

“It’s fine, don’t let it bother you,” Rio said with a soft smile and short shake of his head.

“We’ve derailed off-topic, but Sir Amakawa was able to sneak into Count Claire’s secret room because Celia was with him... as I’m sure you’ve all realized now. After that, we were able to escape the search party surrounding the estate and flee from the city with Sir Amakawa’s assistance,” Christina said, returning the conversation back on topic.

“Huh. So why did you come to this fortress? You were heading for Rodania, where you thought Flora was, right?” Hiroaki asked.

“We anticipated the shortest route from Cleia to Rodania would be heavily monitored by the search party. Plus, if we headed for Rodania through the Galarc Kingdom, we’d be able to shake off the search party as soon as we crossed the border. However, it seemed they were able to pinpoint our escape route through some means, and ambushed us with a huge army right near the border...” Christina paused, looking at Rio, Sara, and the other spirit folk girls. “Thanks to the help of Sir Amakawa and his comrades, we were able to drive away the enemy and capture their commander, Charles, and take Alfred as prisoner.”

“Ah, well, I won’t doubt Haruto’s strength at this point, but his comrades? You’re not talking about those two dull dudes over there, right?” Hiroaki glanced at Kouta and Rei before asking in the direction of Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

“It seems you’ve realized it already, but these three are my ‘comrades.’ From the right, there’s Sara, Orphia, and Alma. All three of them are skilled warriors that can use enchanted swords,” Rio answered in their place.

“Hmm...” Hiroaki hummed, looking at the girls with great interest. Sara, Orphia, and Alma looked a little uncomfortable at being stared at and avoided eye contact.

“...”

Meanwhile, Liselotte and Duke Huguenot had expressions of pure awe when they heard there were three enchanted sword users present.

“Wow, that’s seriously impressive. You all have such pretty faces, yet you can fight well too,” Hiroaki complimented with intense interest.

All the girls around me have lived such sheltered lives... Having a warrior position in the harem would be invaluable. Just by having them around, they can protect me, he thought to himself.

“Thanks...” Sara said on behalf of Orphia and Alma. However, she seemed to be thinking something on the inside, as she almost sounded a little curt. Perhaps he had sensed this, as Duke Huguenot immediately changed the topic.

“I see, so even Sir Alfred cannot handle four enchanted sword users. I almost doubted my eyes when I saw Charles and the King’s Sword captured as prisoners... How fortuitous,” he chuckled. Having an important figure of the enemy Arbor faction imprisoned was truly exhilarating—enough to make laughter surge up within him at the mere thought.

“That isn’t true,” Sara suddenly said.

“What do you mean...?” Duke Huguenot asked with a rare look of surprise.

Sara corrected Duke Huguenot as she hated being credited when she hadn’t contributed. “We merely drove back the other enchanted sword users that were present. The one who defeated that Alfred person was Haruto alone. In fact, the one who captured that man called Charles and drove back the army of 5,000 waiting at the border was Haruto alone.”

“Oh my...” Liselotte gasped in surprise, covering her mouth with her hand. The fact Sara and the girls had driven back other enchanted sword users was impressive enough, but the scale of Rio’s achievement was large enough to paralyze the senses.

Duke Huguenot had been speechless in shock, but he looked at Christina and asked for more clarification. “I don’t mean to doubt you, but what do you mean?”

“It’s the truth. Sir Amakawa defeated Alfred alone. Or rather, he took on Sir Rui Shigekura and Alfred together in a two-on-one battle—and won,” Christina stated.

“He took on the hero and the King’s Sword together... and won?” It seemed

like that fact was far beyond anything resembling common sense within Duke Huguenot. He froze, at a loss for words.

“So he won against that nasty, handsome bastard, huh...?” Hiroaki’s brows twitched in reaction.

Nasty...?

Courteous and gentlemanly. That was the impression of Rui they had from watching him converse with Rio, so hearing Hiroaki’s opposite opinion made Sara and the others cock their heads in wonder. Meanwhile, Kouta and Rei were snickering at the bad reputation given to their friend and underclassman respectively.

“I hope this has clarified everything for you, Lady Liselotte. This is the reason why our army was deployed so close to the border. Though their aim was to capture me and they have now retreated, this doesn’t change the fact we have provoked your kingdom. We must have caused terrible trouble for you and your father. I offer my deepest apologies.” Christina looked at Liselotte and bowed her head deeply. It was extremely rare for a princess to bow her head at a noblewoman of another kingdom, but that extremely rare exception had come about because of her. She bowed her head as the princess of her kingdom.

“Not at all. Please lift your head,” Liselotte said to Christina in a fluster.

Christina paused for a moment, then slowly lifted her head. “Thank you.”

Liselotte exhaled in relief. “That aside, I wonder how they were able to detect Your Highness’s movements? If they were tracking you from the moment you left Cleia, then there would have been more chances to ambush you without waiting right until you reached the border,” she wondered aloud.

“The greatest reason is simply because they didn’t have the time, I believe. Every three days, Sir Amakawa and his group would use their enchanted swords to enhance their bodies and carry us while they ran, which substantially shortened our travel time. When the enemy caught wind of our location, we were around three days away from the border. After considering the group’s fighting capability and mobility, they probably wanted to avoid surrounding us in a forest or mountain area where we could quickly hide ourselves,” Christina said, giving her logical reasoning.

“Indeed, that hilly area is perfect for troops to hide at the foot of the hills while watching for anyone climbing them. If they had griffins in the sky, escape would be fairly difficult too...” Liselotte said thoughtfully, recalling the geography of the area. “But even with that taken into account, deploying an army so close to the border is an overly bold strategy.”

“Yes. That’s why we believe there was a counterplot behind that strategy,” Christina nodded, then frowned in frustration.

“Bold and cunning... He may be overbearing, but that Charles Arbor must be quite the commander,” Liselotte said in praise of Charles.

“I wonder about that... This is Sir Amakawa’s opinion, but I am in agreement—Charles may have been goaded into deploying the army so close to the border by a man named Reiss. The true cunning one behind Charles is that man.”

Christina brought up Reiss’ name for the first time.

“Reiss...? Isn’t that the name of...”

“The mysterious man who previously appeared before Princess Flora and Haruto when Amande was under attack, isn’t it? And also the name of the Proxia Empire ambassador...”

Liselotte and Duke Huguenot recalled the time Princess Flora was kidnapped during the commotion of the attack on Amande.

“Yes. We’ll need to investigate Charles some more, but that man is most likely the ambassador of the Proxia Empire,” Christina stated with certainty.

“Lucius Orgueil, was it? The man who abducted Princess Flora, the target of Haruto’s revenge, and the former noble of Beltrum Kingdom, now leader of the Heavenly Knights. I considered the possibility of Princess Flora’s abduction being an act of resentment, but if he’s connected to the Proxia Empire ambassador and Charles, then there’s a possibility Duke Arbor’s faction was involved in Princess Flora’s abduction,” Duke Huguenot suggested, bringing up Lucius’ name.

“It may be too premature to decide that... However, we will interrogate Charles regarding that as well. Although it could be possible that Duke Arbor

was the one involved, and Charles may know nothing. We shouldn't hope for anything," Christina said with a heavy sigh.

Like Princess Christina said, we can't expect much. If Charles knows nothing about Lucius, then the only clue left is Reiss. If this man is the Proxia Empire ambassador, then it's more than possible Lucius is also connected to the Proxia Empire...

Rio turned his head over the whereabouts of his arch enemy. He couldn't overlook the implication Reiss had made that Lucius was still alive—he had to finish him off next time.

"That aside, did you say the leader of the Heavenly Lions is Sir Amakawa's target of revenge?" Great surprise lit Christina's eyes as she looked at Rio.

"Well, yes. He's the man who killed my mother when I was a child," Rio confirmed, giving a short answer as though to hide the feelings in his throat.

"Oh... Is that so..." Christina fell silent and didn't ask anything else. She had probably read the room, her expression like she was thinking of something.

"I'd like to question him about Lucius, so may I attend the interrogation as well?" Since his connection to Lucius had been brought up, Rio used this chance to make his request.

Christina closed her eyes and nodded slowly. "I understand. In that case, of course."

"Thank you," Rio bowed his head respectfully. Watching him from the side with slightly conflicted expressions were Sara, Orphia, and Alma. They must have been curious about Rio's connection to Lucius. Flora had a similar look on her face as she watched Rio.

Christina seemed to notice Flora's gaze, but acted like she was unaware as she looked around the room. "Are there any more questions?"

"Ah, yeah. Sara said something about Haruto driving back an army of 5,000, but I don't quite get that. It'd be one thing if he was a hero with Divine Arms like me... But if he was up against Alfred and that bastard Rui, he couldn't have taken on 5,000 people on top of that at the same time, right? I'm curious about how exactly the battle played out," Hiroaki looked at Sara and asked about Rio's

fighting.

“The 5,000 soldiers were acting as a human wall before the border. They were only watching quietly as Sir Amakawa fought with Alfred and Sir Rui. When they saw the two get overwhelmed, they knew they wouldn’t be able to win against Sir Amakawa, even as a group of 5,000. He was that terrifying to see...”

Christina began to speak about the earlier fight she witnessed, forcing down the various emotions swirling in her chest. She explained the situation at the time eloquently. “After Alfred and Sir Rui were defeated by Sir Amakawa, not a single one of those 5,000 soldiers stepped forward to protect Charles, who fled into their midst. They simply watched on as their commander was dragged away before them.”

“Hey hey, were those soldiers incompetent? Their enemy charged right into the middle of their formation, right? This isn’t some low-budget stage play, if you all charge at once you can kill him with your numbers. There must have been someone who thought that—heck, if I were the commander I would have ordered it. Oh, was it the commander who was incompetent?” Hiroaki complained, seemingly displeased by this fact.

“The soldiers present instinctively understood that they would be no match for Sir Amakawa. Even I feared him, and he was my ally—so I’m sure what the soldiers felt couldn’t be compared to me. Only those who were there would know what that shuddering fear felt like. It may sound like a dramatized heroic saga to those who weren’t there, but it’s the truth.”

Nobody wanted to die. No one would challenge someone in a battle they knew would end in pointless death. Those who did had either resigned themselves already, had gone mad, or were pure fools. Christina maintained an exceedingly serious face as she spoke to Hiroaki.

Ah, I’ve been thinking this for a while, but doesn’t this guy stand out too much? He’s always there wherever I go, snatching all the glory. He’s playing a bigger role than the hero, and now his reputation’s going to rise again? In front of Liselotte, too? Plus, he always has different women with him each time I see him... Don’t tell me they all belong to him, other than Christina and her lady knight? Tch... What a downer.

Hiroaki ripped out the dregs of his heart as he looked in turn from Rio to the girls all sitting opposite him. He didn't like that the focus of the conversation wasn't on him—the hero—but a regular knight.

“You must be a big deal if you could do that. Equal to a hero. No, since you defeated Rui, you must be better than a hero? Well, that's if Rui was using his Divine Arms at full power, of course. But still, it's impressive.” Hiroaki seemed to know that if he had completely denied these achievements, his own reputation would be affected. Instead, he begrudgingly accepted Rio's feats.

“Yes, I think that was a tremendous achievement.” In contrast to Hiroaki, Liselotte offered her admiration with no ulterior intentions.

“I'm honored,” Rio replied, dipping his head at the two of them.

“This is essentially the story of how we arrived here, but there are some explanations I've omitted on purpose. I'd like to properly exchange information for the sake of our relationship with Galarc as well, so would you be willing to engage me in more conversation, Lady Liselotte?” Christina asked.

“Of course. I'll need to make a report to King Francois and Father as well, so that would be most welcome,” Liselotte nodded pleasantly.

And so, Christina began to share the information she had.



Roughly one hour later...

“Let's end the discussions here. What should we do after this...?” Christina looked around at everyone in the room.

“The sun's already set, so it'll be difficult to head for Amande today. How about you all stay at the fortress tonight? It'll take some time to prepare dinner, so if you would like to question the prisoners in that time, you may use an interrogation room. What would you like to do?” Liselotte asked.

“Alfred and Charles will both be expecting an interrogation. We may slip up if we rush into things recklessly, and it would be a problem if that allowed them to regain their composure. Let them stay in the dungeon today. If Charles' pride is wounded, he may be more open to talking,” Christina said, taking into

account Charles' personality. She wanted to provoke him by delaying the interrogation in order to suggest he was a low priority on her radar. If he refused to speak after that, she would continue to leave him alone until his mental fatigue accumulated.

Liselotte understood Christina's intentions. "I understand. I shall arrange for the two of them to be given minimal food and no information whatsoever."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now that we're done here, please take some time to relax here until dinner. I shall have rooms prepared for you—though they may not be the most elegant. Do you have any requests regarding your accommodations?" Liselotte asked.

Flora looked at Christina. "Umm, may I stay in your room tonight?" she asked somewhat shyly.

"Sure, I don't mind," Christina nodded with a soft smile.

"Then I shall prepare one room for the two of you. I'll also have Vanessa's room assigned next door, to make it easier to stand guard," Liselotte said, looking at the royal siblings warmly.

Vanessa bowed her head. "Thank you."

"In that case, could we stay in the same room as well? There are some things we need to discuss with each other," Sara raised her hand and said, looking at Alma and Orphia seated beside her.

"Understood. Then... How about a four-person room with Lady Sara, Lady Orphia, Lady Alma, and Lady Celia?" Liselotte asked the four to-be roommates.

"Would that be okay, Celia?" Sara checked.

"Yes, I don't mind," said Celia.

"If no one else has any requests, you'll be given a single room. Is that okay?" Liselotte confirmed with the others.

"Yes, that's fine with me."

"Same here."

Duke Huguenot and Rio both replied first.

“We’re okay with that as well.”

“Yeah.”

Rei and Kouta exchanged looks before replying.

Roanna hesitated for a brief moment before answering, perhaps out of concern for the hero Hiroaki and the royal siblings Christina and Flora. “I’d be satisfied if my room was close to Sir Hiroaki and Her Highnesses...”

Nowadays, she served as a caretaker for Flora and Hiroaki, but with Christina in the picture, she needed to show even more delicate consideration.

Hiroaki met Roanna’s eyes and shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

“Then I shall show you the way immediately,” Liselotte said, standing up and walking towards the door. The others followed her lead and stood up. Aria had gone ahead to open the door, when—

“Excuse me, Lady Liselotte,” Celia said.

“Yes, what is it?”

“With your permission, may I have some time to talk to Aria?”

“Of course. I was going to send Aria over after Sara and the others had some time to talk, but would you like to chat with her now?” Liselotte replied cheerfully.

“We can always talk at night, so please go ahead, Celia,” Sara said, Orphia and Alma nodding in agreement.

“Thank you... Then I shall take you up on your offer, if you don’t mind?” Celia asked Liselotte.

“Got it. Then you may stay in this room and use it. Aria, you’re off duty for the rest of today. Take your time and relax with Lady Celia.”

“Thank you very much,” Aria said with a faint smile.

“Cosette, Natalie,” Liselotte called to the two attendants waiting outside.

“Did you need something, Lady Liselotte?” Natalie responded respectfully.

Meanwhile, Cosette was casually trying to meet Rio's eyes, smiling cutely once he looked at her as though to say "long time no see, Sir Haruto." Rio flashed a brief smile and gave a short nod in response.

"Show the people of the Restoration and the two boys to their rooms. Princess Christina and Princess Flora are in the same room. Keep everyone else in rooms next to each other."

"Understood." Natalie and Cosette both bowed their heads.

"Chloe, you escort Sir Haruto's friends to their room. They'll be using a room for four, along with Lady Celia," Liselotte said to Chloe, who was waiting nearby.

"Yes, My Lady," Chloe nodded.

Once she confirmed that, Liselotte turned to Rio behind her. "Sir Haruto, I'm sorry to keep you occupied like this, but..."

"What is it?" Rio asked with a tilt of his head.

"Before I show you to your room, may I have a bit more of your time? There's something which I'd like to discuss with you separately," Liselotte said.

"Sure. I was just thinking the same thing, so it'd be my pleasure," Rio answered immediately, accepting the private conversation with ease. Hiroaki watched them from the side with an unamused expression.

Huh? These two are ignoring me to run off and be alone...?

And he had gone out of his way to drop by and visit Liselotte, too. Was she prioritizing a freshly-promoted knight over a hero?

That being said, there were other girls that had his interest right now—Sara's group. He was slightly discontented by the fact Haruto had brought them along, but all three of them were blessed with looks on par with Liselotte.

They were so attractive, it'd be a lie to say he wasn't interested in getting to know them. Even during their discussions, he kept glancing their way out of curiosity. Or rather, he had no particular interest in the discussions, so partway through the talks he just kept staring at them.

Because of them, Hiroaki decided he would turn a blind eye to Liselotte and Haruto's private meeting and instead use this chance to invite the three of

them to tea while Haruto was occupied.

“Mmm. Ah, what should I do now? There’s nothing to do once I return to my room... Being a hero sure is boring,” Hiroaki suddenly started to say. It was unclear who he was talking to—or whether he was just monologuing—but his tone was incredibly exaggerated.

The parts he had emphasized were the fact he was free, and the fact he was a hero. It was an attention-seeking scheme to lure anyone with a slight interest in heroes—most effective when used against noble daughters. They would swarm Hiroaki even uninvited, which was why Hiroaki specialized in being on the accepting side and had no experience on the inviting side.

“...?” Presently, neither Sara, Orphia, nor Alma had any particular interest in heroes. They found the way Hiroaki suddenly cleared his throat and started speaking odd and cocked their heads slightly, but then dismissed his words as irrelevant to them and addressed their guide, Chloe, instead. “Could you show us to our rooms then, please?”

“Ah, yes. Please, come this way.” Chloe also seemed to find Hiroaki’s sudden actions strange, as she snapped back to her senses at Sara’s voice and resumed her duties.

“Pfft...”

That must have seemed hilarious to Cosette, who nearly burst into laughter. However, as expected for an attendant of Liselotte, she naturally turned her face away so that Hiroaki and the others wouldn’t see.

“Are you stupid?” Natalie whispered into Cosette’s ear.

“We’ll be resting first then, Haruto,” Sara said to Rio in a friendly manner as they left.

“Okay.”

“Come to our room when you’re done,” said Orphia.

“Understood.”

“We’ll be waiting,” said Alma.

“I hope you rest well,” Rio replied to the three of them as he watched them

leave. He then turned around to address Celia before setting off himself.

“Please enjoy your reunion with Miss Aria, Celia.”

...Celia?

Because Rio had addressed Celia without a title, those that hadn’t traveled together with them on the way here all looked shocked. That made sense, as there hadn’t been a chance for them to call each other by their names during the discussion just now. Flora was particularly shocked, blinking and frozen stiff.

“Yup. See you later,” Celia replied with a soft smile, after which Rio cheerfully nodded.

“We shall excuse ourselves first, then. If you need anything, please ask one of my attendants. Sir Haruto, come this way,” Liselotte nodded at Christina and Duke Huguenot’s group before calling Rio away.

“Excuse me,” Rio said, leaving together with Liselotte.

Ah, so that’s what this is. Well, I had a vague suspicion this was the case. So he’s in the picture already. I don’t know if they’re actually dating, but the slightest hint of another man is enough to turn me off. It’s unwanted real estate. Ah, that was unnecessary information, seriously, I did not need to know that. What a let-down. Ah, ah, ah...

It was indeed a cold wake-up call. Hiroaki was terribly dejected in his mind, lightly grinding his teeth as his mouth twisted.

What if Liselotte starts showing favor towards him too? What do they even have to talk about alone? Walking side-by-side like they’re showing off...

With an impressive amount of resentment over a misunderstanding, he glared at Rio’s back. He had avoided interacting with him until now, since it was difficult for him to gain the upper hand. He might need to consider a way to put Rio’s reputation in question, he thought...

Just as he was thinking that, someone who had been observing Hiroaki without him realizing it opened her mouth. It was Christina.

“Shall we go too?” she asked with feigned ignorance.

“Indeed... Roanna,” Duke Huguenot immediately responded. At times like

this, Roanna was best at cheering Hiroaki up. Sensing Hiroaki's bad mood, he had implicitly requested she take care of him.

Roanna quietly drew closer to Hiroaki and touched him, speaking to him from a close proximity. "Yes. Let's go, Sir Hiroaki." When he felt her warmth through his clothes, Hiroaki's attention turned to Roanna.

Roanna really is great at things like this. And yet, Liselotte... What a shame. She's acting like such a tease.

He had gone out of his way to visit her, yet she wouldn't prioritize him. Displeased with this, Hiroaki sighed tiredly as though he was expelling all his rage.

"Ah, yeah. There's nothing to do, but I'm a little tired. Let's relax together in my room. Flora and... Christina? What will you two do?"

He seemed to be in a better mood now, as he grinned while winding his arm around Roanna's shoulder before turning to Flora and Christina to invite them along. The brief pause before calling Christina's name was probably because he was unsure of the state of their relationship.

"What will you do, Christina?" Flora asked, watching for Christina's reaction.

"I have a small matter I'd like to discuss with Duke Huguenot, so you go on ahead. I'll drop by once I'm done. Is that okay with you?" Christina said, smiling at Hiroaki gracefully.

"Well, I'm sure you have more information you want to share now that you've met up. I don't mind. But I want to speak to you as well, so make it sooner rather than later." Hiroaki nodded smugly, making a show of how generous he was. Now that she had joined up with the Restoration, Christina was on his side and not a top priority for him to win over.

Considering that, his attention was more focused on Liselotte and Sara's group, whom he didn't know when he would have another chance to interact with, but Christina's smile just now struck him right in the heart.

"Of course," Christina nodded cordially.

Nice. She's got a personality that differs quite a bit from her little sister. A bit

like a rose with thorns, but that isn't bad, either. Hope we can chat soon.

Hiroaki was restless with anticipation. Thanks to that, he was able to drive Haruto out of his mind for now.

"Then I'll have Roanna and Flora soothe my boredom with some conversation first," Hiroaki said, pulling himself together.

"If you would like to have a discussion, you may use that open drawing room over there," Natalie suggested to Christina and Duke Huguenot. It seemed the meeting room they had been using until now was right beside another one, on top of another door that had connected to a simple kitchen.

"Thank you for the consideration. We shall gratefully accept," Christina said warmly. Her elegance was enough to enchant even those of the same gender.

"Then I shall prepare tea and snacks for you. Cosette, please show everyone else the way." Natalie entrusted Hiroaki and the others to Cosette before heading into the meeting room first.

"Sure, no problem," Cosette hummed, seeing Natalie off.

"I'll see you later then, Christina," Flora said reluctantly.

"Your Highness, words cannot describe how honored I am to be in your presence once again. I look forward to our next opportunity to speak together." Roanna bowed her head low, expressing her respect for Christina.

"You've done well supporting Flora. Please tell me about everything that happened in my absence later."

"Of course," Roanna replied, happy to receive Christina's appreciation. Then, she turned to Celia. "Professor Celia, I'm so glad to see you again too. I hope we can speak a lot later on as well."

"Yes, it's been a while, Roanna. I'm glad to see you again too. Princess Flora, long time no see," Celia replied, beaming.

"Indeed, Professor Celia. And, umm, well..." Flora replied to Celia with a fleeting smile, stumbling as though she was searching for the right words. Rather than gauging Celia's reaction, it was more like she wanted to ask something.

“Hmm...?” Celia seemed to realize that and cocked her head curiously.

“Let’s go, then.” Hiroaki prompted them to move, cutting off the conversation.

Flora ended the conversation sadly. “Okay... Please tell me your story later, Professor Celia.”

“Lead the way... Cosette, was it?” Hiroaki addressed Cosette as though he had to recall her name. However, Liselotte’s attendants had all caught his attention as top tier women, so he had memorized every one of their names and faces. He pretended he had to recall it because of an indescribable sense of shame that he felt.

“It’s an honor for an attendant like me to be remembered. Please, come this way.” Cosette smiled pleasantly, but immediately started leading them without any idle chatter. Hiroaki watched her back while humming to himself.

Hmm, Liselotte’s attendants sure have a high sense of professionalism.

Even when he complimented them, they seemed happy but evaded him with grace, and never fell for his attempts to catch their attention. He suspected it was because they were on duty, but thanks to that he’d had no chance to gather any personal information.

Since they rejected him in the name of their work, they were a bad match for Hiroaki’s style of waiting for an invitation. Which meant Hiroaki had to actively attempt to interact with them, but he hated having others realize he was one-sidedly trying to get in good graces with someone still indifferent to him. He had to be in the superior position at all times, which was why he passively waited for offers.

If only I could catch Liselotte, then her army of attendants would come along as a bonus, Hiroaki thought as he walked after Cosette, continuing to watch her back. When he thought of it that way, Liselotte’s existence was truly appealing. Remembering that she was with Haruto right now made his resentment return, though...

Wait a minute... Could Liselotte’s curt attitude also be caused by a professional mindset like her attendants? Maybe she doesn’t want to involve her

personal feelings when interacting with me during her work...

Such a thought suddenly came to Hiroaki's mind. It wasn't impossible, considering how focused her attendants were while they were on duty.

Ah...

Hiroaki's footsteps came to a stop.

Roanna immediately stopped too, peering at Hiroaki's face beside her. "Sir Hiroaki?"

"No, it's nothing." Hiroaki shook his head and started walking again. Behind him followed Roanna and Flora, then Kouta and Rei.

Christina had been watching Flora's back as she left, but then she addressed Celia as she started entering the other meeting room. "Then, we shall go inside the room as well. Until later, Professor Celia."

This left Celia and Aria as the only ones remaining.

"After you," Aria invited Celia inside the meeting room in an attendant-like manner.

"Geez, what's with that? It's just the two of us now, so you don't have to be the attendant," Celia said a little uneasily.

"Hehe. Now, let us go inside. I'll prepare some tea." Aria showed a rare glimpse of a soft smile and entered the room with Celia.



Meanwhile, Rio had arrived at the room Liselotte led him to.

"I hope you don't mind if we use the room I'm staying in. Please, go inside," Liselotte said, opening the door and inviting Rio inside first.

Is it okay for a man to enter the room of a noblewoman? She doesn't have her attendants around, either...

There had been situations where they met one-on-one in meeting rooms before, but Rio still wasn't quite familiar with the etiquette of nobles. However, since Liselotte was okay with it, he was probably just overthinking things. More than anything, the fact they were alone like this was proof of Liselotte's trust in

him.

It would be weird for him to hesitate for too long, so Rio answered Liselotte's trust by bowing slightly before entering the room. "Excuse me."

The room was like a studio apartment with a simple kitchen, bed, wardrobe, table, and chairs to sit on.

"I'll prepare some tea for you now. I'm afraid there isn't much space, but please have a seat." Liselotte pulled out the seat at the head of the table and offered it to Rio.

"Thank you very much," Rio said as he sat down.

"No problem at all," Liselotte said cheerfully, standing in the kitchen behind Rio. She began preparing tea with skillful movements.

It feels kind of strange... Rio thought as he watched Liselotte's back. She had a strong image of being a noble lady, so seeing her pour tea was rather domestic.

"Do you often prepare tea by yourself?" Rio asked her as she heated water with a magical artifact.

"Yes, whenever I'm alone. I've rarely ever prepared it for anyone else though, so I can only hope this is good enough," Liselotte said shyly, her cheeks a faint shade of red.

"It's tea poured by you. I'm really looking forward to it," Rio chuckled.

"Gosh, don't put more pressure on me."

Thus, they chatted idly until she was done and Liselotte returned with a tray in hand. The tea still needed to steep for a while, so they didn't pour it out right away.

"Now, let's get down to business—but first, I'd like to thank you for coming here." Liselotte bowed her head at Rio as a preface.

"Not at all." Rio returned the bow. "Like I said earlier, I had things I wished to discuss with you too... Though it's more of a request from Satsuki."

"Oh my, from Satsuki?" Liselotte blinked.

"Yes. The topic of Japanese food came up at the banquet, if you remember.

Naturally, the food would taste better if we all ate together, so I wanted to invite you along, since you were present at the time.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

If Liselotte had been in the capital before meeting Rio here, she may have met Satsuki and heard already, but apparently that wasn’t the case. Liselotte grinned happily.

“The problem is when, where, and who else to invite along...”

Rio, Liselotte, Satsuki. The three of them were usually in separate locations, which made it rather difficult to make plans. There weren’t any convenient methods of communicating like in modern Japan where they could just call or text.

There were magic artifacts capable of long distance transmission, but the information would openly leak to anyone else with the same artifact within transmission range, so it couldn’t be used for private matters.

Codes existed, but communication was limited to those who knew the code, and there was a risk of the messages being deciphered. Highly confidential information was always to be passed through word of mouth—this was general knowledge.

If important people were to hold a dinner featuring unusual cuisine, it wouldn’t be strange for masses of nobles to hear about it and request their participation.

“Which means the planning will need to be done privately,” Liselotte immediately presumed.

“Yes. I don’t want the gathering to be too big, as it would be hard to enjoy the nostalgic tastes while worried about eyes surrounding you.”

“I completely agree,” Liselotte nodded firmly. This was her chance to enjoy food she hadn’t tasted since her previous life—she wanted to enjoy her fill without worrying about her surroundings.

“Which means, at the very least, Satsuki and Miharu would be included. Are there any others you would like to invite?” Rio asked, starting with the

attendees.

“Let’s see... There’s no one in particular I’d like to recommend from my acquaintances... But I’d like to talk to your friends more. Especially Lady Celia and Lady Aishia. They helped out during the attack on Amande, yet I’ve barely spoken to them at all.”

“Celia and Aishia... Would that include Sara and the others too?”

“Yes. I’m sure Satsuki would want to meet them too, if they’re friends of Miharu as well... Also, if possible, I’d like to meet the girl who was always riding the bus in our past lives,” Liselotte requested.

Satsuki has actually met everyone already, during that time she snuck out of the castle while we were there for the banquet. Which only leaves Latifa, but...

Rio owed Liselotte a lot, and they were at least friends now. He would feel bad if Liselotte was the only one unaware of that fact during their dinner. And above all, he would feel guilty making the others act like they were meeting each other for the first time before Liselotte. It would probably be best to explain things.

However, the problem that came to Rio’s mind was Latifa.

He wasn’t certain, but there was a strong possibility the one who sent Latifa to assassinate Rio years ago was Duke Huguenot. Stepping into that territory might bring up traumatic memories for Latifa, so he had purposefully avoided that topic since coming to the Strahl region and becoming acquainted with Duke Huguenot.

Until now, she had mostly stayed inside the stone house and hadn’t been brought to any events involving nobility, but—

This may be a good opportunity for her to grow. To erase her past scars.

He recalled what Elder Ursula had said at the meeting before coming to Strahl with Latifa.

Was it really okay to make her mostly housebound, even though they had come to Strahl? Shouldn’t he let Latifa experience more things, for the sake of her future?

He didn't know what was correct. But if Latifa wanted to meet Liselotte, he wanted to respect that as her older brother.

Rio thought about everything carefully before giving a rather optimistic answer. "It may not be possible to arrange, but I understand. I'll ask everyone about it."

"Really? Thank you so much!" Liselotte beamed happily.

"Not at all. Actually... that elementary school girl is my little sister," Rio revealed.

"R-Really?" Liselotte was shocked.

"Yes. We're not related by blood, but she was reborn into a rather complicated environment. Certain events led to me becoming her guardian. She's a bright girl now, but she may harbor negative feelings towards nobility, especially certain nobles of the Beltrum Kingdom... That's why she lives with some close acquaintances most of the time and doesn't go out much," Rio explained to Liselotte, hinting at Latifa's dark past.

"Oh..."

"However, I want to do whatever I can for her. If she wants to set out into the outside world, then I want to support her. I wouldn't have any objection to introducing you to her. That's why I should be the one asking you—please meet with my little sister? I'm sure she'll be delighted." Rio quietly bowed his head.

"I understand... In that case, leave all the arrangements to me. I'd love to meet her as well. I'll prepare a venue where she'll be comfortable. I'll also make sure her name and face aren't revealed to outside parties," Liselotte nodded firmly, taking on the role of the organizer.

"That would be very reassuring. Like I just mentioned, I especially want to keep her away from the nobles of Beltrum Kingdom. At least, as long as she doesn't want something to the contrary..." Rio said with a slightly troubled look, his words carrying deeper meaning.

A shadow fell over Liselotte's face. "Whatever happened must have been terrible..."

“Yes. I can’t say anything, which I am sincerely sorry for... I shall discuss things with her regarding that first, so that she can explain things to you herself if she ends up meeting you in the future.”

“I understand. Then let’s limit the participants to Satsuki, your sister, and your friends. That way the only people she would be meeting for the first time are Satsuki and myself.”

“Regarding that...” Rio fell silent for a moment, before resolutely speaking. “There’s something I must inform you. It was rather difficult to tell you before, but I believe it is the right thing to do now that we’re holding a dinner. If possible, I’d like to keep it between ourselves.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“My friends and Satsuki have already met.”

Liselotte looked clearly confused. “Umm... Was there a chance for that to happen somewhere?”

“Yes. Secretly.”

“Secretly... So His Majesty was unaware...?”

“He is unaware of this fact.”

“Then... When? How did they meet?”

“They met while we were in the capital for the banquet. It was outside of the castle. We snuck out without anyone noticing.”

“H-How...?”

“By flying.”

“I... I see.” Liselotte looked fairly shaken, but accepted his words as reality.

“I’m sure you’re surprised, but you seem to have accepted it rather easily despite that.”

Flying out of the castle was a concept so ridiculous, it would normally be dismissed immediately. It might have been possible if they had left riding griffins, but that wasn’t recommended at night and could catch the attention of the guards with the sound of their wings.

“I heard that you used your enchanted sword to fly when you rescued Lady Miharu from the enchanted ship last time.”

“So you knew already...”

“Yes. Although I didn’t expect you to sneak out of the castle.”

“My apologies. I attended through your invitation, yet behaved in such a risky manner.” Rio bowed his head in such a way as though it was being sucked downwards by gravity.

“No, I have a guess as to why you did it... But why did you reveal this to me?” Liselotte asked, looking at Rio’s face.

“Neither I nor the others are particularly skillful people. I don’t believe we would have been able to lie to the face of someone we had grown friendly with.”

Liselotte paused in wonder. “Thank you very much...” she said somewhat shyly.

“Why are you thanking me?” Rio blinked.

“I’m just happy to be told that to my face... At any rate, I’m now aware of the situation. If that’s the case, how about we hold it in my house in Amande?”

“At your estate? Satsuki will be there, right?”

He couldn’t bring her out of the castle by flying like last time, and Amande was too far away from the capital. They would definitely notice if she went missing, he thought.

“We can’t have you bring her by flying again, no? I intend on going through the proper route of asking His Majesty for permission to invite her over.”

“I see, in that case... Is it possible?”

“There’s a good chance it could happen.”

“If you say so, then it must be a fact. Can I leave it in your hands? I’ll need to let the others know.”

“Yes, you can count on me. Do you have a preferred time as to when we should hold it?”

“If you can host it within the next month or two, I’ll arrange things on my end. Any longer and I may need to travel again, however...”

“Then I’d better make a move before you need to leave again. I just so happen to plan on going to the capital next to make my report on this incident, so we may be holding it sooner than expected. I know you’ll be heading to Rodania after this, but what will you do afterwards?”

Liselotte wondered if he would stay in Rodania, or if he would accompany her to the Galarc Kingdom’s capital.

“I don’t have any plans of staying in Rodania in the long term, but Celia... I plan on leaving after I’ve confirmed her safety, as I owe her a lot,” Rio answered. Though she hadn’t said so out loud, Celia would surely remain in Rodania. It was a little sad to think they couldn’t live together anymore, but there was nothing they could do about it. Celia was a noble of Beltrum, after all.

While part of him wanted nothing more than to head for the Proxia Empire right away, he had to take some time and make sure there were no problems regarding Celia’s circumstances. That’s why he had no intention of rushing out of Rodania.

The fact he calls her name without a title means they’re fairly close, right? I wonder what kind of relationship Sir Haruto and Lady Celia have...

Liselotte was curious about it, but it wasn’t good to pry into things purely out of curiosity. And so, she exercised her self-control.

“I see...” Liselotte responded, though she still had a curious look in her eye.

“Aishia’s also looking after Miharuru and my sister at the moment, so I’ll have to meet them to tell them about the dinner. But it would be best if that waited until after I meet you either in Amande or Galtuuk so that I can confirm the details of the dinner with you. You can decide the date based on what suits you and Satsuki.”

“By the way, if you were to bring Lady Miharuru to Amande right now, how many days would it take?”

“If we walk normally it could take one to two weeks depending on the weather, but if I carry her while I run, we could arrive in two or three days.”

“What a wonderful time reduction... Out of curiosity, but how many days would it take you to travel from Amande to Galtuuk?”

“If I’m alone? Two days.” His fastest time would actually be if he flew, but—

“T-Two?!” It seemed that to Liselotte, even two days was plenty of a surprise.

“As you know, I can use my enchanted sword to fly. As long as I’m not hindered by bad weather, I can reduce my travel time dramatically.”

That was why the number he had given accounted for the weather. The Wilderness had especially abnormal weather, so it wasn’t rare for him to spend some days safely waiting out the weather in the stone house.

“Then... Let’s say it’ll be some time between three weeks to two months from now. Would that work for you?”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Then I shall move ahead and presume the dinner will take place in that time frame. If transporting the ingredients is too much of an effort, I can prepare an enchanted ship depending on your location...” Liselotte hummed.

“There’s no need for that.” Rio shook his head, then looked thoughtful.

“Hmm... I should inform you about this as well.”

“What is it?”

“A method of transporting items. If we’re going to be trading alcohol with each other in the future, it would be best to clarify this. Only those close to me know about this, but I trust you would be able to keep this a secret.”

“I’m quite honored you think so, but...”

Just how was he transporting things?

“This is what I use. *Dissolvo*.”

Rio extended the hand that held the Time-Space Cache and recited the spell. The space around his wrist warped and a ceramic bottle appeared.

“Wh... What is that?” Liselotte froze with her eyes wide open, barely managing to get her question out.

“It’s an ancient artifact called the Time-Space Cache. There are certain

limitations to its use, but it can store things in a subspace isolated from time and space. As you can see, you can take items out whenever you need them,” Rio explained.

His disclosure of the magic artifact’s existence to Liselotte wasn’t a completely impulsive idea—he had been considering doing so since they signed a contract during the banquet for Liselotte to sell Rio’s homemade alcohol. This was a good opportunity to reveal it.

“An ancient artifact that can store items in a subspace isolated from time and space... Based on that information, it sounds like you can store food without it rotting?” Liselotte asked cautiously, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“Yes, that is correct.”

Liselotte’s voice audibly shook with surprise. “That is quite an unbelievable item you have there...”

An enchanted sword that could control wind, artifacts that could change hair color, and high-grade sake that could make a noble groan with a single sip... Just how many treasures did he have hidden? She was starting to feel more exasperated than impressed at this point.

Possessing this many impressive goods was abnormal in itself, yet because she was aware of Rio’s irregular strength, even this abnormality was faint in comparison.

An artifact that can transport goods without taking up space?! I want it! I want it so badly! But I can’t say such unreasonable things to Sir Haruto!

The Time-Space Cache was an item any merchant would kill for. Liselotte nearly blurted for him to give it to her, but swallowed her words with difficulty. Because it was an ancient magic artifact, it was probably impossible to manufacture or acquire.

“There’s alcohol in this bottle, if you’d like to have it.” Rio placed the sake bottle on the table as an offering.

“W-Why, thank you very much.” Liselotte bowed her head.

“And so, I’m able to transport goods using this artifact. There’s no need to

worry.”

“I understand.” Liselotte smiled wryly, accepting that her worries were needless.

“Also, *Dissolvo*.” Rio held his hand out over the table and recited the spell once again. A plate of finely cut chocolate appeared. “This is Miharū’s homemade chocolate.”

“Miharū’s...” Liselotte gulped. Unfortunately, there were no snacks in this room, and the only thing on the table was their tea. This would be the perfect snack to go along with it.

“You chant *Conditum* to put it away,” Rio said flatly, storing the chocolate plate back inside the Time-Space Cache.

“Ah...” Liselotte let out a half-surprised, half-disappointed sound.

“*Dissolvo*. Please have it with your tea, if you’d like,” Rio chuckled as he brought out the plate again. He had only put it away as a demonstration of the artifact’s effect—he intended on giving her the chocolate from the start.

“T-Then, I shall gratefully accept one...” Liselotte shyly reached for the plate of chocolate. Knowing how delicious Miharū’s homemade sweets were, she couldn’t resist. “I-It’s so good!”

Rio also reached for one so that Liselotte wouldn’t feel self-conscious while she ate. A sweet but not-too-thick flavor spread in his mouth.

“It’s delicious,” Rio commented.

“Mmm!” A sound of joy slipped out from Liselotte, who nodded enthusiastically as she beamed. Her lovely reaction made Rio smile softly.

“Come to think of it, you said you had something you wanted to discuss too?”

“I wanted to ask you about the two Japanese boys that traveled with you. I don’t know if they’ve realized it yet, but the moment they hear the names of Ricca Guild’s products, they’ll notice the use of Earth words in the product names.”

In order to prepare for that, she wanted to know what kind of people they were like. Once Liselotte answered Rio’s question, she lifted her teacup in a

picture-perfect show of etiquette.

“I see... It hasn’t been that long since I’ve met them myself, but I don’t think either of them are bad people. Kouta is a honest person with a strong sense of justice, and Rei can be a little silly at times, but he watches his surroundings carefully and is always considerate of Kouta. The only thing you have to be wary of is that the two of them are completely normal Japanese high school students, so they’re not really familiar with this world...”

Perhaps that was why Rui was so worried about Kouta and Rei, Rio thought.

“Do you know what they plan on doing after this?”

“I don’t think either of them have decided yet. But it’s very likely they’ll end up joining the Restoration, I believe...” Rio answered, thinking back to how their conversation with Rui made it seem like they left the castle in a spur of the moment decision. Christina had also said they were stowaways on the enchanted ship.

“I understand. Thank you for telling me this.”

“I hope it helped.”

“Yes. I have no intention of telling them about my past life for now, but depending on how it goes in the future, I may reveal things to them.”

They had only just met, so this was probably the most appropriate decision.

“Out of curiosity, how would you have explained your company’s secret if someone untrustworthy asks about the products?” Rio inquired with interest.

“The explanation I have prepared is that the production method was recorded in ancient documents that were discovered. I’ve also prepared those documents.”

“You’ve covered it all.”

Since there were Japanese people who had transferred into this world in the present, it wouldn’t be a stretch to think similar people had done so in the past.

“It was a huge pain to create, though.” Liselotte smiled bitterly, recalling how she made the documents. She couldn’t let anyone realize the handwriting was her own, so she had Aria pen the documents on her behalf, but it took quite

some time to make it look convincing.

“Would you like me to indirectly mention that to the two of them?” Rio suggested.

“I appreciate the concern, but I want to try talking to them myself. I’ll see if I can arrange some time to have a chat with them,” Liselotte shook her head, turning down Rio’s offer. After that, they continued their conversation for a little longer.



A few minutes later, they finished their chat and Rio left the room to find Cosette and Chloe waiting in front of Liselotte’s room.

“Hello, the two of you are here as well?” he called out to them.

“Good day, Sir Haruto. We were waiting for you. None of us recalled showing you to your room and we couldn’t find you anywhere in the fortress, so we were wondering if you were with our master,” Cosette answered with a cheerful grin pasted on her face.

Why was Sir Haruto in Lady Liselotte’s room? With just the two of them. She looked at her master with an expression of protest.

“Oh, good timing. Chloe, show Sir Haruto to his room,” Liselotte said, smoothly ignoring Cosette’s gaze.

“Yes, ma’am. Sir Haruto, please come this way.” Chloe immediately moved, inviting Rio along.

“Well then. Liselotte, Cosette, please excuse me here.” Rio gave his farewells without realizing the exchange going on behind the smiles of the master and attendant.

“Please enjoy your time here and rest,” Liselotte replied with a bright expression. Then, as soon as Rio and Chloe disappeared down the corridor and out of sight—

“Hey, why didn’t you let me show Sir Haruto the way? And more importantly, why were you two meeting alone? In Lady Liselotte’s room, no less,” Cosette protested.

“There weren’t enough people, so I simply dealt with it accordingly. I also had something to discuss with him. You knew that too, which is why you were waiting in front of my room, no?”

“Hmph. Still, inviting someone into the room of a high-ranked noblewoman with no attendants around is a clear display of favor towards them. Why haven’t I heard that you have Sir Haruto in your sights? That means I have no hope!”

“I don’t recall saying that I liked Sir Haruto in that way, though.” Liselotte’s reply was nonchalant, as if to say that she shouldn’t misunderstand.

I wonder if it’s even being conveyed... My favor? she questioned, evading Cosette’s gaze. She had been raised with zero experience in love in both her previous and present life, so she lacked knowledge in that area.

“I know you don’t recall saying it. We don’t recall hearing it either, after all. The problem is whether you favor him or not,” Cosette pressed Liselotte forcefully.

“Enough of this—we’re going. I want to see the two boys that arrived with Sir Haruto. You—come along.” Liselotte started walking briskly, a faint blush on her cheeks. Cosette puffed up her cheeks with a “Hmph!” and followed after her.



Around the time Rio arrived at Liselotte’s room, Christina and Duke Huguenot were meeting in a drawing room.

For Charles and Sir Emarle to be taken prisoner... Princess Christina sure obtained some outrageous souvenirs. Princess Flora is easier to deal with, and the way she sits still without moving is truly convenient, but... Her demerits have enough merits to overlook. The problem is the amount of power she’s given, Duke Huguenot thought in the time before the conversation started.

“I shall now excuse myself here. If you need anything, I will be waiting outside the room.”

Natalie had been preparing tea for them, but she naturally couldn’t stay and listen to the conversation between two foreign nobles, so she voluntarily exited the room. This left Christina and Duke Huguenot alone to finally start their

conversation.

“If I may express my amazement, Your Highness: for Charles Arbor and Sir Alfred to both be captured as prisoners... It’s a splendid feat,” Duke Huguenot said as soon as the door closed.

“The one who apprehended them was Sir Amakawa, not myself,” Christina replied coolly.

“However, getting acquainted with him and tasking him with your safety was all Your Highness’ skill. I thought it was such a shame that the Galarc Kingdom acquired him already, but then Your Highness brought him out as a trump card. And I hear the three other girls are also skilled enchanted sword wielders? Celia is the genius sorcerer from our kingdom, too. There’d be nothing more delightful than to have them all join the Restoration, wouldn’t you say?” Duke Huguenot raised both his arms.

The Restoration had been concerned by their lack of reliable personnel who were skilled in combat and sorcery. If that insufficiency could be amended in a single go, he would have no choice but to welcome them all wholeheartedly, even though Christina had the potential of becoming a thorn in his side.

“It’s still too early to say that. Professor Celia aside, Sir Amakawa and the other three girls are not nobles of the Beltrum Kingdom. I am indebted to them, but they are still outsiders. There’s no guarantee they will continue cooperating with the Restoration in the future. You shouldn’t assume otherwise,” Christina warned stiffly.

“However... Didn’t Sir Amakawa kidnap Celia from the ceremony in order to strike a blow to the Arbor faction’s influence and serve in guarding Your Highness?”

They must have had some political interest in common for him to have offered his support, and so there should be a way to continue receiving his support, Duke Huguenot implied in his question.

“The common interest that made Sir Amakawa and the girls cooperate with us is unrelated to our goal of reducing the Arbor faction’s power.”

“By which you mean...?”

Christina hesitated, wondering if she should stay quiet about Haruto and Celia's relationship, but realized the way they interacted with each other made it fairly obvious. With that thought, she decided to say it—it also made her story coherent and served as a warning. "Professor Celia's rescue."

"I could tell Celia and Sir Amakawa are close by watching them, but what exactly is their relationship?"

"Professor Celia is Sir Amakawa's savior. Although, it seems that now she is the one feeling more indebted to him."

"Well, it would be difficult to repay a debt as large as Sir Amakawa's achievements... However, he isn't the kind of person to think his debt is repaid so easily, is he?" Duke Huguenot asked, implying that this was their chance to get him on their side.

"Right... That's why there's no way he'd oppose us as long as Professor Celia joins the Restoration. But if we ever harmed her in any way, that sword of his would be pointed right at us without a hint of mercy," Christina cut in sharply.

"Of course, we have no intention of harming Celia..." Duke Huguenot shrugged his shoulders with a nihilistic smile.

"Naturally. But there's no guarantee that someone else in the Restoration won't harass Professor Celia in order to gain Sir Amakawa's cooperation, is there?"

"We wouldn't allow something like that, but..." Duke Huguenot didn't deny the possibility.

"You need to keep a thoroughly watchful eye on things, so that no such fools appear. Professor Celia will be under my protection hereafter, so I will be merciless in my judgments against anything strange."

Whether that was an order or a warning was unclear.

"That sounds rather overprotective. Will you be giving Celia your patronage, then?" Duke Huguenot asked jokingly.

"Isn't that a given? Sir Amakawa easily brushed aside the elite squad of knights and sorcerers that Charles led, shut down Alfred and Sir Shigekura in a

head-on fight, and made 5,000 soldiers tremble in fear. It would be best to keep a favorable relationship with someone like that. Which is why Professor Celia will be the most important person in our connection to Sir Amakawa. I thought you would have understood this much.”

“I am aware of this, but I know many are anticipating Sir Amakawa’s assistance as well. In my humble opinion, we should be pursuing a favorable relationship more proactively...”

“I agree... That’s why I won’t go as far as to say that we should give up. However, I can’t approve of persistent attempts to solicit him when he isn’t interested. This is a matter of showing Sir Amakawa our good faith in order to win over as much of his trust as we can. That’s why I’ll say this again: you need to watch that no such fools appear,” Christina said, strongly emphasizing her point.

“Understood. Being too persistent and creating animosity would indeed be a foolish plan. For the time being, I shall keep it at an invitation to Rodania and a seat at the celebration.” Duke Huguenot placed his hand on his chest and nodded respectfully.

That’s quite some enthusiasm on her part, but I understand her reasoning. He defeated a hero—one of the living legends in this world—and Sir Emarle, Beltrum’s strongest. Possibly Strahl’s strongest. His achievements this time will raise his name even further... He’s a piece that I want to obtain no matter what.

Duke Huguenot thought to himself with his face ducked down. However, he understood that using forceful methods against Haruto, who was currently as famous as a hero, would be a bad move. He was a desirable combat force, and Duke Huguenot would have all the options in the world if Flora had been the one opposing him, but he couldn’t take such risks against Christina.

I wonder what kind of face this man would make if he knew the incident his son made a mess of was what drove such a person out of the Beltrum Kingdom? And how would he move afterwards...? No, there’s no proof Sir Haruto is the same person. There’s no point in thinking about it, Christina thought, then immediately erased those thoughts herself.

This much warning should be enough to hold Duke Huguenot back. All that’s

left is Flora. Perhaps she...

There were several things about the earlier discussion that bothered Christina—she'd have to confirm them later. She ended that train of thought there and returned her focus to the person sitting opposite her. There were still things she needed to ask.

"In addition to this, I'd like to hear about the events that occurred while I was away."

"Why, the most notable event would be Your Highness's arrival with Charles Arbor in tow as prisoner, but..." Duke Huguenot placed a hand over his mouth in thought. "First, as I'm sure you've heard already, Princess Flora was kidnapped by a man named Lucius in Amande. And..." He stared closely at Christina's face.

I heard about that from Sir Amakawa on the way here, but I'll ask Flora for the details later.

"And? What else?" Christina asked while concurrently thinking to herself.

"Princess Flora and Sir Hiroaki are now engaged."

Christina's expression flickered. "...What did you just say?"

"After the banquet, marriage offers for Sir Hiroaki increased rapidly. This was decided just the other day, when we decided that it would be bad to prolong the decision of Sir Hiroaki's first wife. Sir Hiroaki and Princess Flora have both given their agreement, and King Francois of Galarc has been informed," Duke Huguenot reported eloquently.

"Has it been announced publicly?" Christina asked in a stiff voice.

"No. It hasn't been announced yet, and not even Liselotte should be aware of it yet. The plan was to make the announcement upon arriving back in Rodania."

"..." Christina fell silent. Political marriages were the natural duty of women in royalty and nobility, but marriage was still too early for Flora. That's what her heart was telling her, but was she just being a needlessly worried sister?

Flora surely didn't have any other choice. She must have accepted the engagement prepared for her without knowing anything about what marriage

involved.

“Is there anything problematic about it?” Duke Huguenot asked innocently. With Hiroaki’s agreement and Francois’ knowledge about the engagement, not even the First Princess Christina could make an objection so easily. The duke was asking this while knowing that. Besides, it was only logical to offer something commensurate when trying to obtain beneficial personnel.

If Princess Flora and Sir Hiroaki’s engagement works out, it’ll make it easier for me to intervene. It was worth rushing the engagement.

Duke Huguenot chuckled amiably.

“...No, I was just a little surprised.” Christina shook her head with the utmost calmness. There was no telling what Hiroaki would hear if she got emotional and said the wrong thing here. That’s why she had no other choice right now.

If only... If only I had come a bit sooner...

She would have been able to take her place. She would have been able to lighten Flora’s burden. Christina cursed her own helplessness from the bottom of her heart.



Meanwhile, in the meeting room beside Christina and Duke Huguenot, Celia and Aria were holding their long awaited reunion.

“I feared for you when you were abducted from your wedding ceremony, but I’m so glad to see you safe and sound. Though I never imagined we would reunite in such a way... No, I suppose it would be more accurate to say we’ve already?” Aria smiled.

“Ahaha... I couldn’t reveal myself as Celia Claire to anyone at the time. I’m sorry,” Celia apologized, feeling ashamed for deceiving her old friend.

“There’s no need to apologize. If anything, I should be the one thanking you. You helped Amande when we were being attacked even at the risk of revealing yourself.”

“I only did what was right. And the one who decided to help was Haruto. You should thank him, not me.”

“Sir Amakawa isn’t someone I can casually request a meeting with, but if I ever have a chance to speak with him privately I shall do exactly that.” Aria nodded her head deeply, agreeing.

“Ah, right... He’s really that remarkable now. Then I’ll mention it to him too,” Celia mumbled earnestly, pressing her hand against her chin in thought. Then she giggled as though she felt pride in that fact.

“Yes, please do... You know, you look really happy when you talk about him,” Aria pointed out with a chuckle.

“R... Really?” Celia was taken aback, blushing faintly.

“Are you unaware of it?”

“I-I’m the same as always. Totally normal. It’s only natural to be happy when someone close to you is being acknowledged.” Celia feigned a prim face as she spoke to a somewhat exasperated Aria.

“If I may be so bold to ask... Are you and Sir Amakawa in love with each other?”

“I-In love?!” Celia suddenly turned bright red.

“It seems complicated circumstances are involved in the sequence of events where Sir Amakawa saved you, so naturally, there’s no need to answer if you cannot. However, as an old friend, I cannot help but feel curious about those circumstances.”

“H-Haruto and I aren’t like that, we’re not in love or anything...” Celia said, trailing off in embarrassment.

“I see. His feelings aside, it seems you have feelings for him.”

“I said you’re wrong!”

“Right, right,” Aria chuckled in understanding.



“What about you, then?” Celia pouted her lips and probed into her old friend’s love affairs.

“Unfortunately, my job is too busy and leaves me no time for love.”

“But your job gives you plenty of opportunities to meet men, right?”

“I won’t deny that, but good matches are practically nonexistent. In any case, I’m not working in order to meet men in the first place.”

In reality, she had received many offers from men, but Aria’s resolve was strong, and she turned aside all kinds of invitations in the name of social politeness.

“You haven’t changed at all. Don’t be so focused on your work that you miss your chance to marry,” Celia said tiredly.

“That goes for the both of us.”

“Ugh...” She had brought that upon herself. The retort was sharper than the enchanted sword Aria wielded.

“At any rate, we’re both getting on in years. Let’s take care not to have any regrets.”

“R-Right...” Celia mumbled, nodding in agreement.

Chapter 3: Jealousy

Around the time Rio was finishing up his discussion with Liselotte, Hiroaki had been led to a guest room by Cosette and invited Flora and Roanna inside to soothe his boredom.

Generally, Roanna would bring up a topic, Hiroaki would rattle on about it, Roanna would ask a question that was easy for Hiroaki to answer with a boast, and Hiroaki would continue the conversation from there. Roanna was a responsive conversation partner that reacted in a way that made the speaker feel good, so she truly was a comfortable person for Hiroaki to converse with.

“I used to think my sense of personal space was on the bigger side, but I guess you never really know,” Hiroaki said while sitting down on the narrow three-seater sofa. Flora and Roanna sat on either side of him while he had his arms spread.

Normally, they would either all sit on individual sofas or comfortably share a three-seater between two of them while the third sat on an individual sofa, but the guest rooms in the fortress only had the bare minimum in the way of furnishings.

“Well, sit down,” Hiroaki had said, having positioned himself in the center of the sofa and beckoned Flora and Roanna over, resulting in the three of them sitting together.

“Personal space?” Roanna reacted to Hiroaki’s words, inclining her head.

“Ah, it’s the distance where other people are too close for comfort. The closer you are to the other person, the shorter this distance is, and the less acquainted you are, the wider it is. You wouldn’t want to sit here with a random old man, right?”

“Indeed, I would prefer to decline such a thing... But I have no opposition to the current arrangement,” Roanna said, bringing herself closer to Hiroaki’s shoulder. Meanwhile, Flora maintained a shy distance that avoided contact with

Hiroaki's body.

"My personal space used to be so big, I found it annoying when someone entered an empty restaurant after me and sat themselves within my field of view. But I don't dislike the current setup," Hiroaki snorted, grabbing Roanna's shoulder and holding her closer.

"Geez, that was because it was a man, wasn't it?" Roanna asked with a cute pout.

"Nah, there are some times where I hate it because it's a woman, too. Especially when there are other open seats, but they purposefully sit near me. I just want to eat my food in peace, but they start blabbering about dumb topics."

"What do you mean by that...?"

One might think she was asking if he didn't like her sticking so close at the moment.

"I wonder?" Hiroaki smirked, evading Roanna's stare with a laugh. At that moment, he could tell Roanna pressed herself even closer. He chuckled smugly. "It's a narrow seat, but things like this are nice every once in a while too, no?"

"I don't mind if we're like this all the time, though," Roanna answered with a slight pout.

"Hahaha!" Hiroaki burst into hearty laughter. Then he sighed and said, "Ah, it really is the best to have someone who understands you when you're tired and feeling frayed along the edges. In reality, being with women who are all looks and zero understanding is so irritating."

The ones who came to mind were the girls who weren't in this room right now—with the exception of Christina. He was displeased with the fact they hadn't actively tried to involve themselves with him, the hero. Just recalling it made his irritation return.

"I guess that means I'm an understanding woman, then?" Roanna immediately asked.

"Nope," Hiroaki shook his head. Then, he added, "You're understanding *and*

you have the looks. A truly charming lady indeed.”

“Geez,” Roanna blushed in embarrassment.

“So, what’s with you, Flora? You’ve been silent this entire time.” Satisfied with Roanna’s reaction, Hiroaki turned to Flora, who hadn’t participated in the conversation at all.

“Huh...? Ah... No...” Flora was unable to come up with any words at the moment. She seemed distracted, like her mind simply wasn’t there.

“...” Hiroaki sighed disapprovingly.

“Umm, I was thinking about my sister and Sir Haruto... I was wondering what they were up to,” Flora answered with naive honesty.

“Who knows? Christina should be talking to Duke Huguenot, right? But why bring up his name?” Hiroaki frowned openly at the mention of Haruto’s name. *Not again*, he thought.

“No, I was just thinking that a lot must have happened while they were traveling.”

“Between Christina and that bastard?”

“That’s not what I mean, but Professor Celia was there too...” Flora trailed off.

“Hmm...” With even Celia’s name mentioned, Hiroaki hummed with disinterest. But on the inside, his displeasure was rapidly building. “Is it really a big deal? That he defeated the King’s Sword or whatever? It seemed like people were making a rather big fuss about it,” he said, expressing his doubts towards Alfred’s abilities.

“Sir Emarle has been acknowledged by the king as Beltrum’s strongest. He can use an enchanted sword to release powerful blades of light, and his strength is so well known that they say it’s an understatement to call him a one-man army,” Roanna said a little hesitantly, knowing that the answer wasn’t what Hiroaki wanted to hear.

“Yet he and that Rui bastard were beaten up by that fresh-off-the-farm greenhorn. That Rui bastard—it impacts me too if he loses in a way that sullies the name of heroes,” Hiroaki mumbled sullenly.

So the King's Sword uses blades of lights to attack? Sounds like setting off my Divine Arms at full power would definitely be stronger. But Satsuki already lost to him in a sparring match, and that Takahisa bastard also had a bad time against him. He appeared around the same time as the heroes, yet he's standing out more than us. At this rate, he'll be valued higher than us. Even his name is similar to us Japanese people.

If only there was something he could do about it, he thought as he felt a sense of danger from Haruto's recent activities.

Hmm. Is there anything I can do to lower that bastard's protagonist characterization? By making him lose face or something...

He folded his arms in discontent, falling silent in thought. Meanwhile, Roanna sensed his mood and quietly waited for Hiroaki to begin speaking again, while Flora awkwardly remained silent.

It'd be so convenient if someone could just go and defeat him once. Seeing how the so-called kingdom's strongest—the King's Sword—was no match for him, no one in the Restoration will be able to beat him in a close-ranged match either...

Everyone was just so worthless: all name and no substance. There wasn't anyone who was the "real deal," as it were. However, though he was irritating, Haruto Amakawa's abilities were probably real. Hiroaki had witnessed Haruto fight in the flesh from up close, and his combat powers were indeed impressive. He didn't want to admit it, but Haruto was strong. However...

Hold on a minute... There's no need to fight in a close ranged battle where the bastard has the upper hand, is there? If I can maintain a distance while one-sidedly attacking him, then...

A brilliant idea suddenly came to Hiroaki's mind.

That's right—fighting in his ring would be nonsense. That fool Rui also went out of his way to fight him at close range when he's a bow user, or so I hear. That was probably why he lost. He should have just camped somewhere advantageous and defeated him with long-ranged attacks.

Hiroaki analyzed the cause of Rui's defeat and sneered.

Dragging your opponent into your own ring to win is the ultimate tactic. Since the power I obtained is too great even in an incomplete form, I've rarely had the chance to test it out properly, but wouldn't he be the perfect opponent? If I say I want to test my ability, it might work.

He could see a way for him to win against Haruto Amakawa. Of course, it would be a sparring match, so they wouldn't fight for real, but it would be a good form of stress relief. There was no telling if Haruto would agree to the match, but it wouldn't hurt to ask.

Ah, great. In the end, I have to be the one standing out.

The only ones who could cull the genuinely strong were the stronger.

"Ah, I've just thought of something. I'm going to see Haruto."

Hiroaki immediately began his plan.



Around the same time, Chloe was leading Rio to his guest room after his discussion with Liselotte ended.

"Here you go—please use this room. This is the key," Chloe said, stopping in front of the room and handing Rio the key.

"Thank you very much, Chloe. If you don't mind me asking, where are Sara and the girls who came together with me?" Rio asked.

"I showed them to their room right over there." Chloe gestured with her right hand, pointing out the room where Sara and the others were staying.

"I understand. If you would excuse me," Rio said, then started walking towards Sara's room.

"Sure."

I wonder what kind of relationship he has with the three of them? Chloe wondered, watching Rio knock on the door before she left. The door opened and Sara stuck her head out from within.

"Haruto."

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

“Not at all. Please, come inside.”

After that exchange, Rio entered the room as Chloe quietly left.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Rio said as he stepped inside.

“We were waiting.”

“You’ve worked hard today.”

Orphia and Alma welcomed Rio from where they sat on the beds.

“Please, have a seat.”

“Thanks.” Rio sat down on one side of the three-seater sofa that Sara offered him.

“There was something we had to tell you, Rio.” Sara used Rio’s real name since only those in the know were in the room.

“What is it?”

“Now that Princess Christina has joined up with her allies, we were thinking of returning to the stone house. We don’t think we should get too deeply involved with the noble class of humans—or human politics in general,” Sara began.

“I see... I agree, that would probably be for the best.”

The spirit folk girls were eye-catching enough with their appearances, but they must have attracted a lot of attention by showing up in a group while wielding enchanted swords. If they continued to Rodania like this, they would definitely receive some form of invitation.

“We do want to continue accompanying you, but...” Sara said worriedly. Orphia and Alma frowned too.

“No, you’ve been a tremendous help coming this far. The journey will shift to enchanted ships once we reach Amande, so you’ve done enough. I’d appreciate it if you could protect Miharuru and Latifa instead.”

“Of course!” The girls nodded energetically in unison.

In contrast, Rio had a shadow over his face. “Thank you so much. And I have to apologize for how much danger you were subjected to. Especially to you, Orphia—you were injured as a result.”

“What are you saying? Celia isn’t important to just you, Haruto. She’s important to us as well,” Sara said.

“Yes, exactly,” Alma agreed.

“We’ve all recovered completely and nothing terrible happened. We were all really happy to be able to travel around and learn about the world with you. We’ve never had the chance to travel on foot before, so everything felt new,” Orphia said, flashing a bashful smile.

“You even got Rio to hold you in a bridal carry at the end there.”

“That’s right... Wait! What are you saying, Alma?!” Orphia protested with a faint blush.

Sara watched the two of them and sighed. “We learned a lot from this trip, especially in that final fight with the mercenaries. If you hadn’t taught us how to fight against people, we may have had a much tougher time,” she said, looking back on the battle.

“Indeed. It was great that we were able to get real experience fighting.”

“Yup. And now we know there are lots of strong humans out there, too. The one I went up against was especially tough.”

Alma and Orphia added to Sara’s words with serious expressions.

“The King’s Sword... Was what they called him, right? From what I saw of Rio’s battle, we wouldn’t be able to win against him—not with the limitation of fighting while we pretended our weapons were catalysts for sorcery activation, at least,” Sara analyzed with a stern look.

“However, if you were able to use your spirit arts freely, warriors as skilled as yourselves should be able to hold your own. If things ever get really dangerous, please don’t hesitate to fight using your spirit arts. I do not wish to see anyone else getting hurt from fighting,” Rio requested with a worried face. He had been beside himself with worry when he had arrived to see Orphia and Celia down on the ground before Charles and the others. The village had placed a rule on them to keep their species and spirit arts hidden as much as possible when they departed, but it wasn’t something they needed to worry about protecting at the cost of their lives. At least, that was what Rio believed.

“Thank you very much...” Sara and the others exchanged looks before thanking him with embarrassed joy. They could tell Rio was truly worried about them.

“There’s nothing you should be thanking me for...” Rio said with a pained smile.

“I’m happy that you were angry on behalf of Celia and myself,” Orphia said, closing her eyes and placing a hand over her healed stomach.

“...It was the right thing to do,” Rio said awkwardly. If possible, he didn’t want others to see him being angry and acting violently, since he normally gave off an image of rationality and humanity. He had previously scared Ruri and Sayo like that, too.

“We saw you in a way we’d never imagined before, but it was a really cool version of you, you know?” Orphia said with a grin, staring at Rio’s face.

“Please don’t make fun of me...” Rio’s eyes widened faintly before he ducked his face. He was smiling softly in embarrassment.

“Orphia’s right. It reminded me of when you protected Latifa when the wyvern flock attacked the village,” Alma agreed with a giggle.

“I remember that,” Sara said, keenly recalling those memories.

“It was a long time ago now.”

“It’s been four or five years since then.”

Orphia and Alma reminisced with distant looks in their eyes. Perhaps that was why the room filled with pensive silence.

“Come to think of it, what were you discussing with Liselotte?” Sara asked, changing the topic.

“We were making plans for next month. Liselotte was thinking of bringing Satsuki to her home and hosting a meal, and invited me to attend with everyone in the stone house...” Rio said.

“Oh. We’d love to attend, but...”

“We just decided it would be best for us not to get involved with human

nobility and politics.”

Sara and the others were rather attracted to the offer. The amount of politics involved in attending Liselotte’s personally hosted meal was completely different to the act of going to Rodania, but the fact they were contradicting themselves already was apparent. If he had asked at a later time, they may have answered differently, but...

“What do we do?” Alma asked Sara and Orphia.

“We’ll pass this time. Even though having a meal together shouldn’t have any political impact, creating exceptions so easily could lead to a slippery slope of making more exceptions in the future...” Sara declared regretfully, her tone extremely serious.

“It’s too bad, but you’re right,” Orphia agreed.

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” Alma shrugged sadly.

“However, since we’re passing this time, we’ll definitely participate next time! If there’s a next time! Definitely!” Sara said, adding a condition to their refusal.

“Doesn’t that defeat the point?” Alma laughed at Sara.

“It’s fine! We have to demonstrate our self-control here, so that the next time we can reward ourselves for doing so,” Sara said, turning away in a huff.

“Right,” Orphia giggled.



“Ah, but Latifa can go ahead and attend. She’ll probably be sulking when we return to the stone house anyway, saying we got to have all the fun. It’ll be a good social experience for her to meet Liselotte,” Sara added.

“I understand. I’m sure Latifa will be delighted as well. I’ll pass on what you’ve said to Liselotte about your attendance, too,” Rio nodded with a gentle expression.

Just then, a knocking sound came from the door.

“Was that a knock...?”

Everyone’s attention gathered on the door.

“Maybe it’s Celia?” Sara stood up and walked over to the door, opening it with a *clack*.

“Sup!” The door opened to reveal Hiroaki, standing there with Flora and Roanna.

“The hero, Princess Flora, and Lady Roanna...” Rio immediately stood up, eyes widening in surprise as he greeted the three of them.

“Hello...” Sara met Hiroaki’s eyes and nodded her head in greeting.

“Sorry to disturb you in the middle of your fun—I heard from this lady that you were in this room,” Hiroaki looked around and snorted. Standing on either side of him was a flustered Flora and awkward Roanna. Behind him was Chloe, who had probably led them to the room; she looked bored.

“Did you need something?” Rio asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing much. I just had a request for you, considering your abilities.”

“By which you mean...?”

“Do you want to have a mock battle with me?”

“May I inquire as to the reason why...?” Rio looked confused at the sudden challenge. He was unsure if he should readily give his consent to it.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard the legends of how mighty the Divine Arms the heroes possess are, but there haven’t been any opportunities for me to unleash

mine at full power. It's a bit of a nuclear weapon... Like magic capable of genocide. Using it carelessly could change the terrain of the land, causing all kinds of secondary disasters. I suppose it can't be helped, since there's no knowing how much damage might occur, but if I don't practice fighting while drawing out its power to some extent, I might not be able to control myself when the time comes, you know?" Hiroaki lamented with a sigh, stating his perfectly reasoned argument.

"Well, I suppose," Rio said in a dull tone, still unable to read Hiroaki's intentions. The statement wasn't entirely incorrect, but it had come too quickly out of the blue.

"But if I fight with my Divine Arm's abilities activated, even in a mock battle, the average person is unfit to be my opponent. Even if I have no intention of killing them, I fear they'll be unable to evade my attacks and die on me. I need to fight a warrior that's actually strong. That's when I realized you'd be a good opponent, since you defeated Rui and the King's Sword. I feel bad for singling you out like this, but can I ask this of you?" Hiroaki said, then glanced over and watched for Rio's reaction.

"Umm... I'm sorry for the unreasonable request. We haven't consulted with my sister about it yet either, so it's okay if you refuse him." Flora, who had been anxiously listening to Hiroaki talk, was unable to contain herself any longer and spoke up.

"Eh?" Hiroaki let out a small noise reflexively. Flora was a coward that normally didn't speak up, yet she had to go and do something unnecessary now. Why did she decide to speak up this time? Because it concerned Haruto? That thought agitated him.

I see. So it's just him being selfish. Rio had thought it was strange Christina wasn't here to begin with, but the exchange just now instantly helped him make that guess.

"I am unworthy of such high praise. However, if you wish to demonstrate the power of your Divine Arms, the time and location must be selected carefully. It is not something I can lightly accept at my own discretion. Once you obtain Princess Christina's approval, I will gladly accept," Rio said, cheerfully giving his

consent with a condition. However, he wasn't saying it as a diplomatic excuse to avoid causing offense through rejection—he really didn't mind fighting as long as the conditions were met.

I may potentially fight with other heroes in the future. Rui had held back from the beginning of our fight, and I want to know more about the powers hidden within the Divine Arms.

If his opponent was willing to reveal his own hand, then it wouldn't be a bad idea to accept this opportunity. There was no need for him to actually win, so he could fight with the abilities that people knew he had without showing off anything new. If he couldn't win like that, that was fine.

Hiroaki seemed to be displeased by the lack of an immediate acceptance on Haruto's part, as he looked slightly sullen, but he refrained from saying anything more, sensing that it would be too pushy to do so.

"Thank you very much. Then we shall inquire with Princess Christina." Roanna said her thanks and promptly wrapped up the conversation. She must have disagreed with deciding this without Christina's permission, as she looked somewhat relieved.

"Please do," Rio bowed his head respectfully, closing the curtain on this discussion.



Later that night, Christina summoned Rio to her, as she wished to speak to him directly. He walked to the designated meeting room to find Flora and Christina together, which made him slightly confused. There was no one else in sight.

It feels kind of strange being with these two together...

It was something that had never happened once throughout his days in the Royal Academy. The reason why he was called here was almost certainly because of the mock battle with Hiroaki, but considering the events of the past and what happened after reuniting with these two, Rio couldn't help but feel a little awkward.

"Thank you for coming so late at night. Please, have a seat," Christina said,

politely gesturing at a chair. Rio nodded and sat down.

“Thank you.”

“I called you here because I want to discuss the mock battle with the hero. Flora said she wanted to sit in and listen too. I hope you don’t mind?” Christina asked.

“No, of course not.”

“Then, to get straight to the point—are you really okay with having the mock battle?”

“Yes. As long as Your Highness has consented, I don’t mind.” Rio nodded his head easily at Christina’s prying question.

“If you’re wary that refusing the hero will cause problems or offense, you’re allowed to decline without concern for others. I will deal with things on my end.”

The partial agreement between Rio and Hiroaki made it hard for Christina to decide whether to give her permission or not. However, it would be a different matter if Rio expressed a desire to refuse.

“I am not acting out of concern for others. If anything, I am concerned as to what Your Highness thinks. If a mock battle between Sir Hiroaki and myself would cause inconvenience for you, I will readily withdraw at your word,” Rio replied with a smile as he looked at Christina.

“The matter that worries me the most is whether this is troublesome for you. If so, I can only offer my utmost apologies.”

“It may become a problem if I receive frequent challenges to mock battles, but this one case doesn’t particularly bother me.” Rio would have preferred more thought to have gone into the timing of the request, but Christina understood that without Rio having to complain, which was why she looked so apologetic.

“And what is the next matter that worries you?” If she had a matter that worried her the most, then there must be something else, Rio thought.

“This is less of a worry and more of a request. Can you win against Sir Sakata

in the mock battle?” Christina asked with a serious expression.

“I’m afraid I won’t know until we actually fight...”

Rio still didn’t know of the extent of the Divine Arms. The abilities of Satsuki and Takahisa’s Divine Arms were sealed in close combat when he had sparred with them, and Rui had been aiming to immobilize rather than kill when they were fighting. Above all, Rui had hesitated, making the bad choice of approaching Rio even though he was an archer.

Based on his experience fighting the other heroes until now, Rio didn’t think they were opponents worth fearing when brought into close-ranged combat, as they hadn’t received any combat training while in Japan. Veterans like Alfred, Gouki, or Uzuma were more formidable.

However, depending on the extent of the power within the Divine Arms, that could change. If they could maintain a distance as they attacked him freely with attacks on the level of natural disasters, then they’d be much more of a problem.

“Would it be better for me to lose the mock battle?” Rio asked. If the hero was allowed to use his abilities and seriously take him on in the mock battle, losing would be a bad look for the Restoration. That’s what Rio assumed, and why he didn’t mind losing in the first place.

“No, the opposite. If you can win, I’d like to ask that you please do.”

“Huh...?” Flora let out a sound of confusion from beside her, possibly because she hadn’t heard of this in advance.

“May I inquire as to the reason why...?” Rio asked.

“I first noticed this when we met at the banquet, but after reuniting at this fortress and speaking more, I’m now certain. The hero seems to be a little arrogant,” Christina stated plainly.

“...” It was a difficult statement to both agree and disagree with, so Rio was silent and waited.

“At any and every moment of time, he has to be treated with the highest priority. If things don’t go his way, he shows his displeasure—and it’s so obvious

that everyone around him can see it. It may have been part of Duke Huguenot's plan, but I believe he's been spoiled a little too much in the time it took for me to reach Rodania. Of course, I cannot completely fault the plan if it was for the sake of the organization..." Christina said with difficulty. "But there's a limit to how far you can go. I believe there are no exceptions to this, whether you are the princess of a kingdom like me, a king, or a hero. Above all, if things continue like this, neither the hero nor we will benefit from it. That's why I believe it would be good for him to lose some of that pride of his."

Not even royalty could speak out too strongly against heroes, said to be the embodiment of divine majesty. However, that didn't mean they could allow his arrogance to continue unhindered.

"And your wish is that I play a role in doing just that. Is that correct?"

"It's not a matter that can be left to the average person, and I cannot ask anyone I do not trust. No one even knows about this apart from the three of us here. I am voicing my private thoughts for the first time here."

Which meant...

She hasn't consulted Duke Huguenot or Roanna, then. No—Roanna aside, she couldn't consult with Duke Huguenot. Their plans oppose each other.

Christina got to work as soon as she joined the Restoration. She was a fast worker indeed—perhaps that was why Flora was also surprised to hear this for the first time.

"I have no one else I can ask right now other than you, Sir Amakawa. Of course, I am aware that it would be too convenient for us to force the role onto you when we should be bearing the responsibility. However, if you say that you don't mind facing the hero in a mock battle, could you consider taking on this request at the same time?" Christina bowed in request.

"I don't mind accepting the mock battle and trying to win. However, I'm not sure if simply winning will be enough to fulfill Your Highness' desires."

In other words, whether that would hurt Hiroaki's pride or not.

"Yes. That is why I would like you to bring out the hero's true strength, then defeat him to make a show of your power difference." Christina described her

ideal vision. Not an instant defeat, but not a drawn-out struggle either. Essentially, she wanted him to fight squarely and force Hiroaki to yield.

“That’s a rather unreasonable request.” Rio couldn’t help but chuckle.

“My apologies. Of course, I vow that no backlash will fall upon you for your victory, and I shall reward you separately with regards to the escorting matter. You are also free to decline if it is unfeasible, but if you could give it your consideration...” Christina bowed her head broodingly.

“I accept.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Please raise your head.” Rio protested in a slight fluster.

Having her bow her head to me so many times really doesn’t feel right.

Their first meeting had been what it was, and with how their relationship during his academy days was like, he still couldn’t shake off the odd feeling he got from the way Christina was now.

“But what will you do about the time and place?” Rio asked, changing the topic.

“I’d like this mock battle to be held privately. I apologize for the rush, but we’ll hold it in a discreet location tomorrow, before departing for Amande. Lady Liselotte has the perfect place in mind and will show us the way there.”

If they sparred after returning to Rodania, they would attract too much attention from the nobles of the Restoration and leave a bad impression. That was probably why she had gone to Liselotte. It was likely that Liselotte wanted to witness the power of the Divine Arms, too.

“I understand. That won’t be a problem.”

Thus, the date of Rio and Hiroaki’s mock battle was officially decided.



“Then, if you would excuse me.”

Rio left the room with those words, leaving Christina and Flora alone in the room.

“We finally have time to talk alone,” Christina said first. After her conversation with Duke Huguenot, word of Hiroaki’s mock battle reached her ears, so she had to make adjustments for that. Hiroaki and Roanna were present for dinner afterwards, so they hadn’t had any time alone until now.

“Yes,” Flora said, quietly watching her sister’s face beside her. Suddenly, Christina turned her body to face Flora, staring at her closely.

“So, don’t you have something to tell me? About Sir Amakawa.”

“Huh?” Christina’s abrupt question made Flora tremble in alarm.

“You’ve been overly aware of him ever since we arrived at this fortress, and you insisted on following me here like this when I said I was going to speak to him. I thought you had something to say to him, but you barely said a word. That’s why it must be me you want to talk to, and it must be something about him. Am I wrong?”

“What? I haven’t been cognizant of him at all...” Flora awkwardly struggled for words, having been completely seen through.

“So, you’re engaged now,” Christina suddenly mentioned. At a glance, there was no change in her expression, but it looked like she was faking her composure.

“You heard about it?”

“Yes, from Duke Huguenot...” Christina offered no words of congratulations.

“I haven’t thought much about marriage...” Flora hung her head. She was still just a fifteen-year-old girl, after all.

“A woman with a fiance shouldn’t be paying so much attention to a man other than her fiance. While the hero’s ego may be hard to tolerate, that is a different matter. One of the reasons why he’s displeased right now partially has to do with you,” Christina pointed out sharply.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“You can just fix things starting tomorrow.”

“Yes...” Flora responded dejectedly to Christina’s curt words.

She hadn't wanted to see her little sister make this face. These weren't the words she wanted to say. And yet, she could only say it in this way. "So... What about Sir Amakawa has your interest? If something's weighing on your mind, try saying it out loud. I'll hear you out." Christina cursed her own incompetence as she addressed Flora in a slightly gentler tone. Now that Flora was engaged to Hiroaki, keeping the fog in her heart bottled up wouldn't be good for the Restoration's future.

"I... I said, there's nothing..." Flora looked like she wanted to say something, but quickly looked down and swallowed her words.

"That's not what it looks like to me," Christina said with an ambiguous smile. She had her suspicions, but she wasn't about to utter them herself without any hard evidence.

After a while, Flora spoke up. "How did you travel here from Cleia?"

"How? We either walked or I was carried while running."

"Sir Haruto carried you?" Flora's interest grew stronger.

"No, he didn't. Sara, the silver-haired girl, carried me. Sir Amakawa carried the two boys that traveled with us," Christina said with a slightly exasperated laugh.

"I see... Then, what kind of person is Sir Haruto?" It was another sudden and vague question, and about Haruto no less.

"He's an amazing person." Christina couldn't reply with a mean-spirited question as to why Flora was asking such a thing, so she replied vaguely instead.

"Amazing... Yeah, he's amazing." For some reason, Flora looked delighted, and Christina was able to guess why.

"Yes."

So she's noticed. She's noticed, and for the same reasons as me, she...

She wouldn't bring up the subject of Haruto's identity herself. Instead, she was sounding out whether Christina had noticed too.

What a hopeless child, honestly...

Christina found that a little bittersweet and pitiful at the same time.

It was too obvious like this. At the very least, it was instantly clear that she had feelings towards Haruto. Hiroaki was probably displeased by that, too.

“How do you feel about him?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Flora cocked her head curiously at Christina’s question.

“What kind of person is he to you?” Christina explained with more detail.

Flora thought carefully, facing her feelings before giving a short reply. “...He saved me.”

“Do you want to do something for him?”

“Yes. Gratitude... Isn’t what I want to do, though.”

“Then what can you do for him?”

“I can’t... do anything.” Flora’s shoulders suddenly slumped, vexed by her own answer.

“Then you don’t have to do anything,” Christina said plainly.

“Huh...?” Flora was stunned.

“If you can’t do anything for him, then that’s fine. There’s no need to be impatient about it. If you force yourself to do something for him, you might end up creating a problem for him instead, no?”

“Right...”

“If you’re still pained by the fact you can’t do anything, come talk to me. I’ll be beside you from now on, so you can vent to me.” Christina nervously moved her hand and patted Flora on the shoulder. Flora had been alone. Her position as a princess meant she couldn’t confide in anyone, so she was isolated the whole time in the Restoration. When Christina realized that, she wanted to touch her. To tell her that she wasn’t alone anymore.

“Can I really...?” Flora asked, looking at Christina’s face.

“Yes. What do you think I came all the way here for?”

“For the kingdom...” Flora answered timidly.

“As a princess, yes. But that isn’t all. I came as your older sister, in order to lessen your burden and protect you. Though I may not be very dependable.”

“T-That’s not true. You’re amazing.” Flora suddenly hugged Christina with a fleeting smile.

“Really?” Christina gently caught her little sister’s body, mouth loosening into a soft smile.

“Yes. You seem to know everything about me... No, about everything around you.” Flora praised her sister while clinging to her adoringly.

“I know you because I’m your sister. As for anyone else, I don’t know everything. But because I’ve observed so many people, I’ve simply learned to predict what emotions people feel at certain times.” Christina had a faintly bitter expression as she patted Flora’s head. She had seen more exchanges between corrupt nobles than she had ever wanted to. Because of that, she thought she understood things—when she really didn’t know anything.

If she had known, she wouldn’t have been cornered like this. She should have been able to conduct things better.

“May I sleep in the same bed as you tonight?” Flora asked, tightening her hold.

“How spoiled of you.” Christina gently patted her little sister’s back.



Around the same time, Rio visited the room where Celia and Sara were staying.

“Excuse me for intruding,” he said before entering.

“Welcome back. How did it go? What did you talk about?” Celia immediately asked worriedly.

“It’s going to be tomorrow after all. There’s nothing to be worried about, so please rest assured,” Rio replied gently.

“I see... But is it really okay? I don’t doubt your strength, but Sakata is going to

use his Divine Arms, right? Like Sir Shigekura did..." Celia said, worrying anyway.

"Well, it's a mock battle, so we won't be fighting with the intention of drawing blood," Rio said, glossing over his answer. He expected Hiroaki would attack him by manipulating a phenomenon of considerable scale. In fact, Rio was accepting the challenge with the intention of bringing out the power of the Divine Arms.

"Don't get hurt..."

"Of course."

"I don't want to see you falling down wounded," Celia said while looking at Orphia. She must have recalled the image of her wounded in the battle with Alfred.

"The same goes for me." Rio didn't want to see Celia and Orphia fallen over ever again. Of course, the same went for Sara and the others, too. With that thought, Rio nodded.

"Good evening."

Light particles gathered in the middle of the room to form Aishia's image.

"A-Aishia..." Celia and the others were shocked.

Rio was the only one who smiled softly. "So, you were nearby after all."

"Yup. The stone house has been set up a fair distance from the fortress. Miharu and Latifa are looking after the house. It looks like there was a battle by the border—was everything okay?" Aishia asked.

"A lot happened..." Celia looked at Sara's group.

"As you can see, nothing is wrong." Orphia clenched her hand into a fist.

"That's good to hear." Aishia's face softened slightly... Or so it seemed, but it was probably a trick of the eye.

"Just to be sure, are there any soldiers still near the border?" Rio asked.

"Nope. They all retreated to the nearby fortress cities."

"I see. That's good, then." Rui must have kept his promise.

“It’s a relief that everyone is safe. Miharu and Latifa were worried too,” Aishia said, which was why she was visiting.

“Everyone is as healthy as can be, so please tell them not to worry.” Sara cutely flexed her biceps to show off how healthy she was.

“Also, it’s been decided that we’ll head to Amande by enchanted ship tomorrow, then stay one night before heading to Rodania via enchanted ship again. It would be better for Sara, Orphia, and Alma to avoid too much contact with human nobility, so they’ll be returning to the stone house from Amande. Could you pass on that message?” Rio requested.

“Got it. If Sara and the others are returning to the stone house, shall I go to Rodania in their place? I can stay in spirit form as Celia’s guard,” Aishia suggested.

“I would be very grateful if you could do that...”

“Okay. I’ll be off, then.”

Thus, it was decided that Aishia would accompany them after their arrival in Amande.

Chapter 4: Yamata no Orochi

The next morning. Rio and the others boarded the enchanted ship that was waiting on the lake, which was used as a natural watering hole beside the fortress. It was time to head for Amande.

However, before they were to arrive in Amande, there was his mock battle with Hiroaki to deal with. The stage selected for them was an open field with a good outlook located on the way to Amande. Liselotte knew there was a lake right before the road stretched into the forest, so they landed there.

This area was one of the lands that the Galarc Kingdom anticipated to become a battlefield in the event of an invasion. There were no sources of water before the forest other than the lake, so it was the perfect location to lay siege and aim for a water shortage for the enemy forces.

For that reason, there was a bit of a fortress city built along the lakeside. Once they anchored the enchanted ship, several people were quickly sent out to the city.

“This should be a good area,” Hiroaki suggested once they strayed far enough from the main road that the city was no longer visible.

The gallery contained a little over ten people—Kouta and Rei were excluded as they currently weren’t members of the Restoration. The rest included Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Liselotte, and several of Liselotte’s attendants, as well as Christina, Flora, their bodyguard Vanessa, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot.

After the spectators backed away a far enough distance to watch over the battle, Rio and Hiroaki faced each other. Liselotte’s subordinate, Aria, was acting as a neutral third-party judge.

“That is all for the rules. Does anyone have any questions?” she asked the two of them.

A situation the judge would deem as victorious was the way to win. The only prohibited action was to kill the opponent. It was a rather dangerous setup for a

mock battle, but it was an agreement reached by Rio accepting Hiroaki's request to exercise the power of his Divine Arms.

"I don't have any," Rio answered first.

"Ah, this is less of a question and more of a suggestion, but can we add a rule to decide the outcome if anyone flees to the safe zone when they realize that they can't win against the other person, and so they accept the loss? In short, the addition of a defeat condition," Hiroaki proposed.

"What do you think?" Aria placed a hand against her mouth in thought and asked Rio.

"I don't mind," Rio agreed easily.

"Ah... The reason I suggested such a condition is so that you can surrender without reserve once you witness my attack in terror. Well, if you're scared, you can just flee as soon as we begin. There's nothing to be ashamed of," Hiroaki added, explaining his intentions behind the additional rule. This rule wasn't for his sake, but Rio's.

"Thank you very much for your consideration." Rio bowed his head.

Tch... Ever the prim bastard, I see. Whatever. The audience is small, but this time it's quality before quantity. I'll shock him with my opening blow and show them all how pathetic he is.

Hiroaki sneered viciously, his will to fight intensifying.

"Now that the rules are confirmed, I will signal the start of the match. The trip to Amande still has to be made after the mock battle, after all."

"Yeah." Hiroaki nodded smugly at Aria's statement.

"Then please distance yourselves as far as you feel appropriate and wait. Once I've judged that you're both ready, I will fire magic into the sky. That shall be the signal to begin the mock battle."

"Understood."

"Got it."

Rio and Hiroaki departed to prepare for the start of the mock battle.

This might end up like a battle between a hunter and a beast. Though the scale of the fight could end up quite large, Aria thought as she alternately watched the two of them take their leave. Then, to prevent herself from getting dragged into their battle, she drew the enchanted sword at her waist and retreated to a position where she could see the two of them clearly.

Not long after that, Rio came to a stop first, followed by Hiroaki, who widened the distance more before stopping as well. There was a hundred meters between the two of them. Rio drew the sword at his waist while Hiroaki called forth his Divine Arms longsword.

He seems fairly cautious of letting Sir Amakawa get too close. Well... His abilities as a swordsman are still amateurish, so that's understandable. Based on the statements he made when adding to the rules, he must intend on devoting everything to a long-distance opening shot. I sympathize with Sir Amakawa for having to distance himself while knowing that...

Aria analyzed that much based on their positions and the earlier conversation, but she had to remain neutral as a judge. She kept that thought in mind as she raised a hand in the air.

When Hiroaki spotted that, he tightened his grip on his longsword. In contrast, Rio remained in a purely natural stance.

"Magicae Displodo!" Aria recited.

Immediately following, a huge magic circle of several meters in diameter appeared in the sky above her. The time it took for the magic to activate after this step varied from individual to individual based on their ability and the difficulty of the spell, but for this intermediate level spell, five seconds was considered quick. Aria activated hers in three seconds.

The light of the magic circle compressed, gathering to a point above her hand before blasting like a cannon towards the uninhabited sky.

It was the sign for the mock battle to finally begin.

"I've been waiting for this moment! I'll have you fleeing in one shot with Yamata no Orochi!" Hiroaki yelled the moment they began, raising the Divine Arms longsword in his hand high in the air. Then, a huge mass of water spouted

from the tip. The water rose into the air, splitting into five currents. The phenomenon that was activated instantly exceeded the scale of advanced magic. Each of the water currents carefully formed the shape of a dragon's face.

"He's activated some tremendous sorcery right off the bat..." Christina muttered to herself bitterly as she watched the attack that exceeded her expectations.

Tch... Only five came out.

Hiroaki looked at the number of currents diverged in the sky and made an unhappy face. The Yamata no Orochi that he named his Divine Arms after was a water god with eight heads. Thus, he actually intended on releasing eight currents of water. The fact that only five came out meant he would have been humiliated in front of anyone that knew of the original legend.

But I guess this'll do. I can control it too... All right.

Considering the speed at which the currents were flying, even a single one of the heads excelled an intermediate level attack magic. Even if he had enhanced his physical body, a direct hit had enough power to seriously wound someone. And yet...

Hey hey, is he still not fleeing after seeing this? It'd be dangerous if it hit him. Read the room and run. Hiroaki frowned at the sight of Rio remaining still.

Well, if he's not running at the sight of this, then he'll probably be fine. As expected of the Black Knight, as they say? That, or he's just a fool... Who cares.

For a moment, he considered intentionally landing the attack in a random direction, but that could have been his aim, and he didn't want his control questioned. He proceeded to send all five water currents to crash into Rio.

"U-Umm... Sir Haruto isn't running. Is this really okay?" Flora worried aloud from a distance, questioning Sara and the others with an anxious face. Christina, Roanna, Liselotte, Cosette, Natalie, and Chloe also turned to look at Sara's group.

"It's fine. An attack like that won't bother Haruto," Sara declared without hesitation.

“Still, to activate something of that scale in an instant...” Alma said in surprise. She didn’t have a very good impression of him due to the looks and words he had sent their way, but it seemed he wasn’t all talk, at least.

“Indeed, it’s remarkable. But...”

“His control of the phenomena is sloppy. The five heads can only make the same movements.”

“Exactly.”

Sara and Orphia analyzed Hiroaki’s attack with precision. To use spirit arts as an example, it was as if the caster’s ability was inconsistent with the scale of the phenomena created. If bringing out five heads lowered the control he had over each one, it would be better to only activate the number that he could control for certain.

Meanwhile, the water currents Hiroaki released landed at Rio’s position.

“Eek!” Flora squeezed her eyes shut reflexively. Roanna was unable to bear it and averted her eyes too, whereas the others were all intently gazing at the landing point of the attack. Water poured from the point Rio had been standing, flooding the area and obstructing their view.

“The match is pretty much decided now,” Sara said.

“W-We have to save Sir Haruto!” Flora paled and tried to run out onto the battlefield, but Sara stopped her by pointing close to where Hiroaki stood.

“You’ve got it all wrong—Haruto will be the victor. Look over there.”

“What?!”

It was Rio, racing along with his sword braced. His speed was restrained a fair bit, but still fast enough to run through a hundred meters in a matter of seconds, closing the distance to Hiroaki and on the verge of attacking him.

“What the...?!” Hiroaki’s reaction was delayed, but he managed to stop Rio’s attack with the powerful physical body enhancement hidden in the Divine Arms.

“When you manipulate a large scale phenomenon like that, you tend to

create more blind spots for yourself. It's a bad idea to let your guard down and forget to stay alert," Rio advised.

"Y-You! What are you doing?! You dare to assist your opponent mid-fight?"

He was underestimating me. Hiroaki swung his longsword using all his rage, and Rio used that strength to lightly step backwards.

"It was bothering me a little, so I couldn't help myself. Even though this is a mock battle, it's common to collect information and search for ways to disturb the opponent even in actual battles. If the opponent gets shaken easily, then that would be ideal. Just like you right now..."

"Y-You bastard...!" Hiroaki forgot about his earlier thoughts of how he was no match for Rio in close-ranged combat and charged forward in irritation. It was exactly what Rio was aiming for. He saw through Hiroaki's attack and caught it with his sword, letting the force escape behind him. Hiroaki was thrown off balance and stumbled forward.

"Guh." Hiroaki tried to pull back immediately, but in the next moment, Rio was stepping forward, shoving a frightened Hiroaki until he was flying backwards.

"Whoa! Oof..." Hiroaki lost his balance and caught himself on the ground.

It was possible for Rio to take that chance and close their distance, thrusting his sword at Hiroaki's throat. But he paused, purposefully choosing not to pursue. His first goal of this battle was to probe the abilities of the Divine Arms, and if he won too easily, he wouldn't be able to satisfy Christina's request.

In other words, he had to crush Hiroaki's pride. A defeat with a potential escape route meant that Hiroaki's pride wouldn't be hurt.

"You... You're looking down on me, aren't you?" A vein bulged at Hiroaki's temple as he questioned Rio.

"I am not. You wanted a chance to fully exhibit the power of your Divine Arms, so I didn't think it was right to decide the match right here and now..." Rio answered with a blank look. *Is this all you have?* he implied.

"You jerk! For all that humility you pretend to have, you sure turn arrogant

during a battle, huh?! Is that your true nature then?!” Hiroaki yelled in fury.

“Fighting is one of the most arrogant actions a human can conduct.”

If there was something you wanted someone to listen to no matter what, if there was a goal you had to achieve, if there was something you couldn’t give up—you fought for it.

Thus, that action in itself was pure arrogance, and those that stood on the battlefield had to be arrogant to do so. If someone was humble enough to hand over their life to their opponent, there wouldn’t be a fight in the first place.

“You sure don’t know when to shut up!” Hiroaki charged at Rio once again. He clutched his longsword in a low position as though crawling along the ground before swinging with all his might. However, Hiroaki’s longsword was easily deflected by Rio’s sword. The sound of heavy metal clashing echoed in the air.

“R-Raargh!” Hiroaki didn’t back down. He poured his strength into the hand clutching his longsword and began swinging it with everything he had. The speed of his swings was too fast to follow with the eyes; they appeared as multiple flashes of light closing in on Rio.

However, Rio saw through all of Hiroaki’s attacks, countering by indifferently swinging his sword to deflect the slashes. The sound of metal clashing echoed intermittently.

“Amazing...” Liselotte muttered. She had been aware of his strength, but even she could tell Hiroaki was being toyed with this entire time.

But why is he holding back so much? Is he dragging it out to save the hero from losing face in an instant defeat? Or maybe he’s trying to respond to the request for the hero to demonstrate the power of his Divine Arms, but is having a problem with it because of how weak the hero is... But dragging it out for too long may end up angering the hero. In fact, he looks pretty angry already.

It looked like Hiroaki was flaring up at Rio in rage, but they were too far away to hear their conversation.

Come to think of it, Princess Christina requested permission to use a meeting room yesterday to talk to Sir Haruto. Did she entrust him with some matter at the meeting? If so, Duke Huguenot is unlikely to be involved... Liselotte thought,

considering the possibility Christina had requested him to fight that way. She shot a sidelong glance at Christina and Duke Huguenot to read their expressions, but they were watching the battle without any notable reaction.

Well, neither of them are the type to express their thoughts on their faces, Liselotte thought, returning her attention to Rio and Hiroaki in the distance.

“Aaargh!” Hiroaki was swinging his longsword with determination, but none of the countless slashes reached Rio. Rio remained in the same place as he parried him. He was like a brick wall, building a barrier of swords to prevent Hiroaki’s longsword from invading.

His movements are quick, but that’s all they are.

Rio evaluated Hiroaki’s swordcraft with disinterest. A longsword was hard enough for amateurs to handle, yet he was swinging his unthinkingly, relying entirely on brute force. His speed was impressive, but his techniques were not quite there yet. A stereotypical example of a warrior who had obtained more physical prowess than they could handle.

This should be enough provocation for now... He still hadn’t seen the true potential of the Divine Arms, and defeating Hiroaki like this wouldn’t crush his pride. Rio considered how to end the sparring match at this point.

“If you’re holding back out of concern for my safety, I’m fine,” Rio said.

“Guh...!” Hiroaki’s face twisted with humiliation. He then distanced himself from Rio and paused, speaking with fury overflowing from under his smile. “Ah... It seems like holding back like this isn’t going to work. I didn’t expect you to be able to dodge a wide-ranged attack in close combat. Though it’s a shame that you seem to think this is my full power.”

“I accepted this mock battle in response to your request to train while using all of the power that normally can’t be used. Your current level is no problem for me, so feel free to bring more of that power out.” His words were courteous, but his manner of speech sounded extremely arrogant in Hiroaki’s ears.

“You’ll regret this...” Hiroaki’s brow twitched.

Give me all the power you have...

He poured even more of the magic essence from his body into his longsword. He didn't even understand the principles of it himself—he just knew instinctively that doing this would give him more power. Then, his longsword began emitting a blinding light.

This is impressive... My physical enhancement is stronger than before?

The physical body enhancement he had used until now had been powerful too, but he was now certain that he had the potential to become even stronger. It gave him a boost of confidence.

Let's test it out before I use another area attack... Hiroaki thought.

"Haaah!" He immediately charged at Rio, pouring his fighting spirit into a shout. He was even faster than before, but—

"S-Shit!"

Rio caught Hiroaki's sword with ease once again. In contrast to Hiroaki's grimace, Rio admired him with honesty. "As expected of a hero... You've increased your physical enhancements even more."

"So what does that say about you when you can deal with it so easily? Huh?!" Hiroaki didn't interpret Rio's praise as sincerity.

"With all due respect, it seems that you are relying entirely on physical abilities to fight. I would advise against doing this, as it makes your movements easy to predict," Rio said, hinting at where Hiroaki was lacking. Incidentally, Rio hadn't enhanced his body with spirit arts—just because Hiroaki was moving faster didn't mean he had filled the gap in their techniques. It was easy enough to deal with him without reinforcing his own strength.

"Huh?! Are you saying my swordcraft isn't good enough for you?!" Hiroaki lashed out.

"Not at all. What you're doing isn't swordcraft—it's just an illusion of sword mastery by forcefully swinging around a sword that's difficult to wield in the first place. You were never taught swordsmanship from an instructor, were you?"

"S-Shut up!" Hiroaki raged at the bullseye comment. However, Rio easily

redirected the trajectory of his longsword and he ended up slashing uselessly through the air.

Hiroaki became even more worked up at that, swinging his sword even more roughly than before. His anger was clear to all the spectators, and it was evident at a glance that the cause was Rio's handling of him.

"If you become fixated on repeating an ineffective attack, your movements become monotonous and easy to counter. Please find another factor that you can win in and challenge me with that. What happened to your wide-ranged attacks?" Rio advised. It was no longer a mock battle, but an instruction course.

"Silence!" Whether it was intentionally or otherwise, Hiroaki swung his sword and fired a powerful blast of water from the blade. The attack swallowed the entire area, but Rio himself had evaded it by leaping away.

"You finally moved to evade, huh?" Hiroaki was pleased by that and grinned.

"You finally put out an attack worth evading."

"Shut your mouth!" Hiroaki broke into a run, provoked by Rio's words. This time, he didn't try to slash at him from a close distance, but fired a blast of water from mid-range.

His dull attacks are still as easy to read as ever, but...

Considering the force behind each shot, they were rather problematic to deal with. Rio moved nimbly around Hiroaki while avoiding the water shots.

"Tch, quit scurrying around!" Hiroaki's attacks increased in intensity, but they still didn't reach Rio.

"Is it just me, or does it look like Sir Hiroaki's movements are improving?" Duke Huguenot spoke up for the first time here, having watched the battle silently until now.

"He's getting better. Haruto must be teaching him as they fight," Sara replied plainly.

"Why would Sir Amakawa do such a thing?" Duke Huguenot asked dubiously. He must have noticed that Rio would have won the moment he drew close if he had been fighting seriously.

“I don’t know. The great hero made a request to show off the strength of his Divine Arms, so maybe he’s responding to that?” As spirit folk, Sara didn’t particularly believe in the legends of the heroes, but she referred to Hiroaki respectfully while in front of the others.

Well, he probably wants to confirm the power of the heroes and their Divine Arms. That, and the request Princess Christina made of him. For Celia’s sake... Either way, the power of the Divine Arms is... Sara thought as she stared at Hiroaki’s longsword.

“If it’ll make the hero stronger, then he’s most welcome to try,” Christina added.

“Well, I suppose...” Duke Huguenot nodded with a vague reply.

In terms of abilities, the difference is as clear as day. The table should be set now.

Now Hiroaki wouldn’t be able to excuse himself if he lost. He was fighting desperately enough for everyone to see that. Christina narrowed her eyes as she watched over the battle.

This guy is seriously a monster... Meanwhile, Hiroaki was beginning to panic. His attacks weren’t making contact at all, and he couldn’t see an end in sight to the strength of Rio’s abilities. He would lose at this rate. After all his boasting.

I can’t lose. More... I need more. I need to attack an even wider area. Should I bring out Yamata no Orochi’s finishing move again? I should be able to call more water dragons than earlier. I just need some distance...

Impatience showed in Hiroaki’s expression as he took a large leap backwards, away from Rio. Then he lifted his longsword into the air once more.

“I’ve got this. I can do it!” he yelled, raising his own morale. It worked: a fierce grin was carved on Hiroaki’s face, now convinced that he could fire a more powerful Yamata no Orochi than the first time.

His magic essence output increases each time he’s cornered. Is he drawing out the power of the Divine Arms?

The only ones who had noticed were Hiroaki himself, Rio, and the spirit folk

girls. Just how much stronger could he get? Rio sensed the power of the Divine Arms was limitless. If the scale of the battle grew any more than this, Rio would have to use some stronger moves himself, which would put the area around them at risk of being damaged.

This is a good time.

He'd tide over the next attack and claim victory. He had no choice.

"Hah! Here I go! Better hope you don't get wiped out instantly!" Hiroaki yelled loudly, summoning seven water dragons into the air. Not only had their numbers increased, but they were slightly larger than before too.

He really has gotten stronger. And faster at strengthening himself, too.

As soon as Rio determined that, Hiroaki's sword came swinging down. The dancing water dragons moved in response to his action, swooping down on Rio all at once.

This isn't that different from before, but...

Their speed had increased. Rio looked up at the seven water dragons approaching from the sky and saw through them instantly, then glanced at Hiroaki on the ground.

He's full of openings. He's increased his output and strength, but everything's so inconsistent... No, it could be a trap.

He considered charging straight in and finishing things just as he did at the start of the match, but with this many openings in his opponent, he questioned it.

It's weird for something called Yamata no Orochi not to have eight dragons. Wait, is it meant to have eight tails too?

There was the possibility that Hiroaki's abilities were too weak to bring out the eighth head, but the scale of the activated phenomenon at the moment wasn't to be underestimated either.

Some spirit art users could remotely control the phenomena they invoked. The weakness of ranged spirit arts was that the caster was unable to move freely—if their ability was too low, they'd be so occupied with control they

wouldn't even be able to move. However, experienced casters could move about normally, and even cast other arts just to be safe.

Hiroaki wasn't a spirit art caster, but the phenomenon of his Divine Arts wasn't all that different. Rio determined that it would be best to treat this as a fight against another spirit art caster.

Just then, one of the dragon heads descended to swallow Rio up. Rio let it draw close until the last moment, then moved away at a rapid speed. Immediately following, another one of the water dragons descended on the spot Rio had been standing moments ago, crashing into the ground and spraying water everywhere with a tremendous sound.

"Heh, I missed. But this isn't all I've got! I'll show you the power of the stage only heroes are allowed to stand on! Five thousand retreating soldiers is nothing. I can do that much as well! You'll see once I show you the power of being a hero!" Hiroaki yelled smugly. The power-up he received had him suddenly returning to his usual self like a fish in water. The two water dragons that crashed into the ground had also returned to their soaring forms in the air.

Indeed, if he could invoke a phenomenon like this, it would be possible to suppress an army with the sheer scale of the phenomena.

What a troublesome person.

Instead of his pride being crushed, it was growing more impudent. He always seemed so sensitive to the slightest things, it was surprising to see him this resilient.

However, that just meant Rio didn't have to hold back when making him lose.

"Hahaha! Are you sure you want to leap like that? My Orochi will swallow you up."

Down on the ground, Hiroaki raised his sword and controlled two of the remaining water dragons to aim for Rio, who had leapt several meters into the air. However, at this point, Rio activated his physical body enhancement through his enchanted sword for the first time. In other words: a forced acceleration with wind spirit arts.

Rio zoomed straight to the ground, letting Hiroaki's two water dragons pass

him overhead.

“Wha...” Hiroaki’s eyes widened as Rio started running to finish the match.

“What, did you think that would shock me? Take this!” he yelled, redirecting the two dragons that had just missed. Rio glanced behind himself to confirm, but continued charging without a care. At this point, the two dragons in the rear were a fair distance from him, but—

Boom!

There was a sound like a dragon’s roar from behind him. Immediately after, the head of the dragon opened its mouth to fire a laser-like blast of water at Rio’s back.

“Get blown away!” Hiroaki yelled, but Rio started running in a zig-zag pattern, as though he had eyes on the back of his head. Both water lasers traced along the ground trying to hit Rio, but Rio smoothly evaded the attack.

“W-What...? Y-You cheater!”

Unable to understand how he had evaded the attacks coming from behind, Hiroaki yelled without thinking. Of course, there was a trick to it: Rio was sensing the change of mana in the air that preceded the phenomena, similar to how electricity sent an advance discharge down the path it would travel through.

“How did he evade that just now...?” Celia had been watching the battle with a nervous face, but Rio’s unbelievable movements had her unintentionally asking her question out loud. At that, everyone’s gazes gathered on Sara and the others. They had completely settled into the role of being commentators.

“Only Haruto could pull off such a thing. If it were me, even if I knew the attack was coming, I’d have to change directions to deal with it,” Sara said, half exasperatedly.

“Right... Of course.” Only Rio could do such a thing. Celia was entirely convinced.

“Does he intend on keeping his enchanted sword’s power sealed as much as he can while he’s winning?” Orphia wondered to herself.

“Most likely. The hero’s fighting style is so bland, Haruto can just devote himself to evading while he approaches,” Alma said, describing what he was doing at that very moment.

“Guh... In that case, try and ride this big wave! You’ll drown if you touch it carelessly, though!” Hiroaki fired three of the water dragons next to him towards Rio, intending to swallow him up.

He seems to be struggling with control after all. Controlling seven phenomena of this scale at once would be difficult for even an experienced spirit art caster... Rio thought, tracking the position of all seven water dragons Hiroaki was sending out. Other than the three beside Hiroaki, there were four water dragons behind Rio, two of which were beyond controlling and showed no signs of attacking. The ones he had to be wary of were the three closing in from the front and the two firing water lasers from behind. Should he evade by detouring around the side, or leaping into the air?

In the end, Rio accelerated towards the advancing tsunami-like water dragon.

“You’re going for it?!” Hiroaki yelled, spotting Rio approaching from head-on before his water dragons blocked his view.

I’ll counter him the moment he shows his face!

He held his longsword at the ready, on guard for Rio’s jump attack. In the next moment, Rio appeared, stepping on the head of the water dragon. He was running while using Hiroaki’s water as footholds. Their gazes met.

“Guh...! I told you you’d drown if you touch it carelessly!” Hiroaki swung his longsword even as his body trembled. However, no water came out of it. Instead, the water dragon Rio was stepping on twisted dramatically, trying to swallow Rio.

But Rio spun as he leaped, enshrouding his sword in a fierce wind and slammed it into the water dragon. The long torso of the dragon was unable to endure the impact and snapped in half. A gust of wind blew.

“Whoa!”

A large mass of water sprayed everywhere. Hiroaki averted his face so the water wouldn’t get in his eyes. Some of the water splashed in them anyway,

creating a fatal opening.

Rio had already landed after leaping over the water dragon Hiroaki released, drawing near to close their distance. Hiroaki controlled his water dragon in a fluster, directing it to obstruct Rio's approach.

Too slow.

At this range, he should have grabbed his longsword and charged instead.

"Damn it! The impudence!" Hiroaki swung his sword roughly, trying to land an attack using area rather than a point, firing a straight shot of water from the tip. The sound of water splashing could be heard.

"Did I get him?!" Hiroaki yelled, his vision obscured. If anyone else had yelled that during battle, he would have lectured them against using such foreshadowing clichés, but even he couldn't help it at a moment like this.

"Guh..."

An arm stretched out from behind him, pointing a naked blade at his throat. A cold chill ran down Hiroaki's spine, making him freeze.



“Using such large-scale attacks creates more blind spots, so you shouldn’t fire them in succession. Your opponent will start to remember the move and learn to deal with it, which could end up being used against you,” Rio whispered indifferently into Hiroaki’s ear.

“D-Did you make the wind at the end?”

If so, just how experienced in battle was he? Hiroaki clenched his teeth with a look of disgrace. The water droplets blown by that wind were what had obstructed his vision.

No matter how he looked at it, this was a decisive loss for him. And yet, his heart was refusing to accept such a thing. He had often watched movies where weapons were thrust from behind and imagined himself being able to handle it easily, but reality was cruel.

He knew Rio wouldn’t kill him, but he couldn’t think of any way to overturn this situation. Even if his heart refused to lose, his body had accepted his defeat.

Anger and frustration suddenly welled up in him until his mind was a confused mess. He wanted nothing more than to throw a tantrum, but the blade pressed against his neck wouldn’t allow it.

“You half-assed bastard!” he cursed instead.

“Half-assed...?” Rio cocked his head, unsure of the meaning of the words.

“It’s what we call jerks like you who fight without giving it their all! Holding back their powers and going easy on their opponent for no reason! Fight with all your strength from the start!” Hiroaki explained. He had fallen to the level of a snappy child.

“There’s no telling what trump cards the opponent may be hiding, and there could be traps too... I don’t think revealing your hand from the start can be considered wise...” Rio said with mild confusion. There was meaning to his actions. Of course, it varied depending on the time and place, but it was generally a risk to show off one’s abilities unthinkingly before evaluating your opponent’s strength. The more of his hand he revealed, the more he could be analyzed and countered. Thus, Rio generally fought by only revealing the hands

he didn't mind revealing.

The only times he would go easy on his opponent would be when he was aware of all the cards in the opponent's hand from the start *and* when he was fighting without a particular goal.

Rio's goal this time was to ascertain the potential strength of the Divine Arms in the unlikely event that he would have to battle a hero in the future. In order to do that, he needed Hiroaki to bring out everything he had, so he had dragged the battle on until this point.

Well, it makes sense he would think that way of me.

Hiroaki didn't know Rio's objective, so none of that mattered to him. Rio wasn't about to argue that point in particular either. Arguing would be pointless.

Now, Aria should be on her way soon...

Rio turned his gaze to where Celia and the others were spectating over the match.



Meanwhile, a few moments later...

"H-Hey. Isn't that water dragon the hero launched kind of heading this way?" Celia pointed in the direction of the battlefield and asked the spirit folk girls beside her. The two water dragons Hiroaki had failed to attack Rio with were soaring unsteadily towards where the spectators were. At this rate, it was possible they would land near them.

"The shock of his defeat may have made him lose control over the spell," Alma said tiredly. Losing control over a phenomenon you activated yourself was something a child would do back at the village. The result could be very dangerous depending on the spell, so the children that messed up would always be scolded, though to an appropriate degree.

"Orphia, can you intercept that?" Sara asked Orphia, who was standing beside her.

"Yup," Orphia nodded, holding her bow ready and stepping forward.

First one...

She poured magic essence into her bow and formed arrows of light, taking her aim.

That's... Rio...

She spotted Rio leaving the battlefield for the mock battle, running their way. Rio had also spotted Orphia with her bow held at the ready.

I'll leave one to Rio, Orphia decided, taking aim on the water dragon she would shoot down.



Rio had spotted the rampaging water dragon a few moments ago.

“Sir Hiroaki, please regain control over that immediately,” he said, pointing to the water dragon moving wildly about.

“Huh?” Hiroaki was in a sulking mood and was refusing to listen to Rio; he could only give a dull reply. With that, Rio gave up on relying on Hiroaki. He couldn’t waste a single second—it’d be faster to solve things himself than rely on him.

Abandoning Hiroaki where he was, Rio started running at a speed several times faster than he’d been during their battle. He immediately activated his wind spirit arts to accelerate to his fastest speed.

He spotted Orphia with her bow ready to intercept the water dragons—their eyes met. Based on the movement of her eyes and the faintest angle of her bow, Rio instantly deduced which water dragon she was aiming for and set his eyes on the other. The sword in his hand was already wrapped in a tremendous amount of magic essence, containing a compressed storm of wind.

Orphia fired an arrow of light from her bow. The outer appearance of the attack suggested a force far exceeding the *Magicae Displodo* Aria used to signal the start of the mock battle. Celia and the others could tell at a glance that it contained the equivalent force of an advanced magic spell.

Meanwhile, Rio had come to a sudden stop before condensing the windstorm surrounding his sword to a point, firing it like a bullet of essence. The blast of

light and blast of wind passed each other mid-air, and the water dragons Hiroaki had lost control over exploded dramatically, turning into a mere spray of water.

“Wha...” Christina, Liselotte, and the other spectators watched that scene with wide eyes. At the same time, Hiroaki finally noticed the mess that his lapse of control had created.

“Whew...” Rio sighed in relief.

Thus concluded his mock battle with Hiroaki.

Chapter 5: Onwards to Rodania

After the conclusion of the mock battle, Rio and the others returned to the nearby fortress city and immediately boarded the enchanted ships to head to Amande.

The problem was that Hiroaki had lost control of his Divine Arms and nearly harmed the spectators. Causing a phenomenon of that scale and being unable to control it was simply appalling. If this had occurred before Christina arrived, Duke Huguenot would have just thanked Rio and Orphia, evaded the rest without blaming Hiroaki, but that wasn't the case this time.

The battle ultimately ended without incident thanks to Rio and Orphia's teamwork, but Christina insisted on addressing the issue, stating that some things deserved an aggressive response. In addition, Hiroaki's attacks towards Rio being far too unreserved was also a target of criticism. However—

“That was partially at my request, as I goaded him to do so.”

At the request of Rio himself, no punishment was given. Hiroaki also seemed to be aware he had made a mistake, as he accepted Christina's scolding while the enchanted ship headed towards Amande.

Upon arriving in Amande, the time finally came to interrogate Charles and Alfred. The interrogation was to take place in a meeting room on Liselotte's estate. Christina, Duke Huguenot, Rio, Liselotte, and Aria would participate.

Originally, Christina's guard, Vanessa, was also meant to be present, but Christina had revoked her attendance due to the uncertainty of whether she could remain calm before her older brother, Alfred. Rio and Aria were there as her replacements.

With their magic sealed with sealing shackles and bodies restrained, Charles and Alfred were brought before them.

“It's time for the interrogation. I have several questions,” Christina said. She was seated on the sofa in front of them while they remained standing.

“An interrogation now...? Rather belated, isn’t it?” Charles asked dubiously.

Of course, he had expected there to be an interrogation. But there should have been many opportunities to question him in the time it took them to arrive at Amande, which was probably why he was curious for the reason behind the delay.

Christina remained silent with a straight face.

“Besides, there seem to be outsiders present?” Charles looked at Liselotte, followed by a glance at Rio and Aria, then questioned whether Christina intended on conducting an interrogation where their kingdom’s secrets could leak out.

“As the princess, I’m the one asking the questions here, but... well, fine. I’ll answer you. The answer to your first question is because I know you won’t have any particularly useful information to begin with. There was no need to interrogate you in a hurry.”

“What did you say...?” Charles frowned at Christina’s scornful answer. It seemed like his pride was hurt. Meanwhile, there was no change in Alfred’s expression beside him.

“The answer to your second question is because you’ve provoked the Galarc Kingdom by deploying such a large army right beside the border. Lady Liselotte has a right to be here on behalf of Duke Cretia, who was entrusted with the defense of the kingdom’s border. I am also obligated to explain the details of what happened to the Galarc Kingdom. It’s only natural for her to be present as a concerned party,” Christina explained. It was as though she was questioning Charles’ understanding.

“Nngh...” Right now, he was clearly being looked down upon. Charles realized that and gritted his teeth in frustration.

“Now, it’s time for my questions.”

“And you think I’ll answer them?” Charles immediately snapped at Christina with a defiant look.

“Who knows? I’m just asking the questions. It’s up to you to think them over and decide whether to answer or not, correct? Or are you incapable of making

your own judgments without the orders of Duke Arbor and Reiss? Did you want me to command you to answer, then?" Christina cocked her head in wonder, coolly brushing off Charles' rebellious attitude.

"Wha..." The completely unexpected response rendered Charles speechless. However, he seemed to realize he was being mocked, as his humiliation was evident on his face.

"Are you satisfied your doubts have been cleared now?" Christina smiled insincerely.

"Y-You liar! If that were true, you wouldn't bother with an interrogation at all! You must be holding this interrogation because I have information you want!" Charles objected in shock.

Christina sighed dramatically. "Mm... As I said earlier, I do not see you as a source of information in this situation. This interrogation is more of a show of good faith towards the Galarc Kingdom. By having Lady Liselotte in attendance, I can convey my intention to share information with the Galarc Kingdom and obtain their trust. I intend on doing the same with the Galarc King as well, if necessary," she explained with heavy exasperation. No, she purposely created the illusion of doing so, in order to show she had no expectations of him whatsoever.

In reality, it was extremely important to give the concerned parties a chance to ask questions when trying to resolve conflicts.

"So you're saying my interrogation is only for show... Nothing more than an example." To Charles, there was no greater humiliation.

"It would depend on whether you had any useful information. That, and your attitude, I suppose. If I can deem you to be a proud noble of the Beltrum Kingdom, then I won't shame you any more than necessary."

She had no expectations of him. That was what Christina conveyed through the shrug of her shoulders, before leaving a thread of hope for Charles at the end.

"Ugh..."

The disgrace so prominent in Charles' expression flickered faintly. His pride

had been stirred by the possibility of not being looked down upon. He was hopeful that he could turn the circumstances in his favor with just his attitude.

“I will now begin the questioning.”

“What information are you seeking?” Charles asked with a conflicted face.

“The fact that Duke Arbor’s faction has strong ties with the Proxia Empire, and that the intermediary between the two is a man called Reiss, has been as good as proven through the incident this time. If this is the case, facts based on this premise will be proven in due course. This is the major premise, but I wonder if you can understand it?”

“...” He couldn’t deny it. He didn’t think they would believe him even if he did. Charles bit his lip in bitter frustration.

“I won’t judge the impact of the Duke Arbor faction’s actions on the kingdom for now. What we want to know isn’t Duke Arbor’s goal, but rather the Proxia Empire’s goal. That, and what their ambassador, Reiss, was scheming by approaching you people.”

“We made contact during the incident where the kingdom lost one of its territories to the sudden raid of the Empire. This blunder was made by none other than His Majesty and Duke Huguenot’s weak political measures towards the Empire. Our Arbor faction were the ones who prevented more territories from being taken. The goals of the Proxia Empire...”

They were beyond their knowledge. There was no way everything would be disclosed to them. Of course, Reiss had stated “We don’t wish to needlessly expand the war front either” during their negotiations, but even Charles knew that Christina wasn’t asking for that.

“I know you must have joined hands because the superficial intentions of the other party aligned with your interests, but there’s no telling what they were thinking in the shadows. Did you not consider that?”

“Of course we considered it.”

“Are you aware that Flora was abducted during her visit to Amande when the city was under attack?”

“I received word of that, yes...” *Was that relevant right now?*

“Then, did you know Reiss Vulfe was one of the abductors?”

“What...?”

“Did you know the perpetrator of the abduction was Lucius Orgueil, a former noble of the Beltrum Kingdom?”

“H-Huh? T-That’s absurd... Why... Lu... Lucius? Why would that man’s name come up here...?” Charles was completely baffled by Christina’s consecutive questions. Even Alfred, whose expression hadn’t changed until now, widened his eyes greatly.

“The Arbor faction collaborated with the Proxia Empire’s ambassador Reiss and mercenary Lucius to plot Flora’s abduction. If that truth was made public, I’m sure it would be quite the scandal for Duke Arbor’s faction. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I-I don’t know. I know nothing about this... I’ve heard nothing! Father... Father may know something...” Charles shook his head furiously.

“Well, I figured as much. That’s why I had no expectations to begin with... But your reaction implies you know of Lucius. Does he have some kind of relation to the Arbor faction?” Christina asked.

“N-None! He definitely doesn’t! That would be impossible!”

“How can you be so certain?”

“That’s because...!” Charles stumbled for words, his expression suddenly pained.

In contrast, Christina merely remained calm as she questioned him.

“Because?”

“H-His house fell to ruin... He may harbor resentment towards our family because of it.” Charles looked terribly shift.

“Just what did you people do?”

“That’s...” *I don’t want to say it. It’s too hard to say out loud.*

Alfred spoke for the first time. “The details are a little peculiar, but in short,

he was a scapegoat.”

“Come to think of it, Lucius was a prominent candidate for the King’s Sword. Naturally, you were acquainted with him, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

Christina glanced at Rio, who was standing on guard beside Alfred, then asked about Lucius. “What kind of man was Lucius Orgueil?”

“His behavior was a little problematic, giving him the reputation of an insincere hooligan, but he was a man with exceptional talent in the sword.”

“Problematic behavior. Is that to say his loyalty to the royal family was nonexistent enough that it wouldn’t be strange for him to plot Flora’s abduction?”

“That’s... He was the prodigal son with little awareness that he was a noble heir, but I would disagree with the statement that he had no loyalty to the royal family at all. However, I cannot say that remains the same now that his house has fallen.”

“When did the Orgueil house fall?”

Alfred thought for a second before answering. “Roughly fifteen years ago, I would say.”

“You called him a scapegoat, but why did the Orgueil house fall?”

“The Orgueil house had paper-thin influence in the royal court to begin with. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say the fate of their house rested on Lucius’ success. However, to their own demise, Lucius had too much talent. That wasn’t amusing to those around them that held too much pride in their social standing. Lucius also had the tendency to look down on those without talent, so he caught a lot of resentment. As a result, his father lost his job when a scandal was forced on his head. Criticism towards Lucius grew stronger, and he suffered terrible harassment. The one who pulled all the strings in the shadows was Charles over there.”

“Guh...” Charles averted his eyes awkwardly.

“Then one day, he completely disappeared. Of course, there were those who

recognized his talents and wanted to keep him, but Lucius wasn't the type to live tied down to begin with. He would have ran away someday," Alfred said with a distant look, reflecting on the past.

"I see. Sir Amakawa, was there anything you wanted to ask regarding Lucius?" Christina suddenly invited Rio to speak, wondering if there was any information he wanted to know.

"Then... Do you know where Lucius is now?" Rio got straight to the point.

"No. I don't know the details of what happened afterwards, though I did hear rumors he was actively working as a mercenary... Why do you want to know?"

Do you have some kind of connection to Lucius? Alfred looked at Rio as though he wanted to ask that.

"After becoming a mercenary, that man killed my mother for no reason other than his own pleasure. I cannot ignore his existence knowing that he's still alive," Rio answered plainly.

"I... see..." Alfred was somewhat shocked, falling speechless. Charles was also listening silently.

In the end, they gained no information of use. Learning about Lucius' past only increased Rio's irritation further.

So it's exactly as I expected, huh... If I want to obtain any clues, I'll have to make a move myself.

In other words, he had to march into the enemy territory himself. Rio quietly steeled his resolve.



The questioning continued for little under an hour after that, at which point the investigation came to an end. Charles was led out of the room by Duke Huguenot, Liselotte, and Aria. This was in order for Duke Huguenot to conduct his own investigation on Charles.

However, Alfred remained in the room. Rio also remained as a guard, leaving the three of them, including Christina, in the room.

"With all due respect, would it be better to call Vanessa over to act as your

guard instead of me? I am aware there may be things you wouldn't wish to discuss before me," Rio suggested to Christina before she began questioning Alfred.

"It's fine. Vanessa lacks the composure to be in attendance right now, and she falls far behind in ability as a guard to you. Of course, I'd like you to refrain from spreading word of what you hear here, but I promise you won't be disadvantaged by your knowledge of the discussion. Please," Christina said a little shyly.

"I understand. In that case, allow me to remain."

"Thank you very much. That's how it is, so there's no need for your consideration, Alfred. Have you mentally prepared yourself?" Christina turned to Alfred and asked.

"Ready when you are," Alfred nodded obediently.

"The fact the King's Sword joined the search party means Father gave some kind of command for you to do so. Is that correct?" Christina asked, first confirming the facts.

"Yes."

"What kind of command was it? Were you told to apprehend me and bring me back to the capital?" Christina's expression was disgusted, but at the same time, somewhat hopeful.

"At the time of departure, His Majesty gave me this order: follow Charles and fulfill your duty."

"What duty would that be?"

"To protect Your Highness," Alfred answered stiffly.

"Protect me?" Christina's face twisted with suspicion.

"Yes."

"What... Does that mean?" Christina asked after a long pause.

"The duty bestowed upon me by His Majesty was to protect you."

"Your actions contradict your words. If Sir Amakawa hadn't arrived, I would

have definitely been captured by you. Are you saying you intended on changing your mind during that battle and betraying Charles?"

"No..."

"Then what do you mean?" Christina asked with slight irritation.

"I cannot say any more than this at the present." Alfred slowly shook his head.



Christina pursed her lips in displeasure. The one who had ordered her out of the castle was none other than her father himself.

What order had that father given Alfred? What was this discrepancy between the man that joined the search party to capture Christina and the explanation that Alfred just gave? She suspected there was a particular aim at play here.

“May I ask for your opinion, Sir Amakawa, as the one who actually crossed swords with him? Where do Alfred’s true intentions lie? Do you think this man’s words can be trusted?” Christina took a small breath and questioned Rio imploringly. Alfred wasn’t the type of man to lie easily. Christina knew that better than Rio would, but she still sought Rio’s opinion.

“I cannot imagine his words to be a fabrication. However...”

“Do you have other concerns?”

“I suppose you could call it an odd feeling? I can’t explain it well, but looking back on it now, it seemed like there was hesitation to Alfred’s actions.”

“Hesitation?”

“Yes. If he was truly trying to capture Your Highness, I believe he would have been able to settle things much faster. Charles and Reiss were aware of our combat strength beforehand, so they set up an ambush after splitting our forces. In other words, if he captured Princess Christina before Sara’s group or I could come running, he would have obtained a hostage and settled things immediately. However, from what I heard from Orphia afterwards, he didn’t seem too interested in battling, and it seemed like he was holding back.”

That’s why something felt odd. Alfred hadn’t devoted himself completely to capturing Christina.

Even if it hadn’t been Christina, the situation would have changed if he had taken a single hostage, so it was hard to imagine his true intention was to capture her.

Although, by the time Rio crossed swords with him, he had been trying to settle things at the fastest speed without holding back, so there wasn’t any hesitation to be felt from him...

“Is it possible that Alfred was trying to carry out the order from His majesty from the position he was placed in? He needed to act like he was following Charles’ orders in order to protect his target, but doing so would increase Her Highness’ chance of escape, so he could only act so leniently without Charles noticing. Perhaps I’m overthinking things...”

If that were true, it was a rather clumsy attempt.

However, once Rio spoke that far, Alfred’s expression twitched. Christina stared at his face closely so that she wouldn’t miss any change in expression.

“Which is it, Alfred?”

“No... I...” Alfred averted his eyes awkwardly, struggling for words. Silence fell across the room.

“That’s quite the guilt-ridden look,” Christina eventually pointed out uneasily.

“I am already your prisoner. I am prepared to take whatever punishment that befalls me.”

Alfred bowed his head like he was offering his neck.

“Are you seeking judgment from me, perhaps?”

“...”

“Enough. I will put aside your punishment for now. Put up with being a prisoner for the time being,” Christina said with a sigh.

“Understood.” Alfred nodded, bowing his head.



The morning after arriving in Amande...

The night before, Rio and the others had stayed at Liselotte’s estate. Today, Sara, Orphia, and Alma would be leaving separately in order to return to Miharu and act as her guard.

“We’ll be going now, then.”

Sara and the others offered their farewells in front of the estate. They were seen off by not only Rio and Celia, but Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei, who had traveled with them. Furthermore, Liselotte, Flora, Duke Huguenot, and

Roanna were present as well.

Having received a house arrest order at his scolding the day prior, Hiroaki wasn't present.

"Thank you so much for everything. If it weren't for Sir Amakawa and you all, we would have been captured in Cleia for sure," Christina said in parting on behalf of the others.

"Not at all. I don't mean to belittle how we feel with such an oft-used phrase, but I wish you good fortune in your future endeavors." Sara also answered on behalf of Orphia and Alma.

"Thank you, truly... I didn't think we'd be parting so soon," Celia said sadly, her eyes filled with tears.

"Please don't be upset. We may just pop up all of the sudden somewhere," Sara said.

"Yup. I want to go visit you again too," said Celia.

Orphia chimed in. "Let's meet up again sometime, for sure."

"I'm looking forward to it," Alma added.

"Yup!" Celia nodded happily.

Such a shame... I would have loved to welcome them in Rodania and invite them to our cause. However, that Miharuru they mentioned is something else—with Sir Amakawa included, not even royalty would have this many capable figures as their guard. I've heard the Aishia girl is also on another level... Just what is going on with his surroundings? Duke Huguenot thought, looking at Rio. Not only did he have miraculously powerful abilities himself, but he was surrounded by other brilliant people. He was like a treasury of exceptional personnel.

By making an enemy out of Rio alone, one would be making an enemy of Satsuki, Liselotte, and even the Galarc King at worst—a terrifying thought. And now Christina was also included in that group.

Perhaps the incident with Sir Hiroaki turned out for the best.

If Hiroaki had gone too far with his envy, he could have caused an even more

problematic situation. Though that meant Christina's foresight was on the mark...

At any rate, he drove away 5,000 soldiers—this is a fact. His fame will only grow exponentially from here. I need to find a way to tie him to the Restoration, Duke Huguenot decided.



After seeing Sara and the others off, it was Rio's group's turn to depart. They were to head to Rodania from here via the Restoration's enchanted ship. Their farewells were said in the garden of Liselotte's estate, just like when Sara's group left.

"I will come pay a visit on a later date, then. Thank you for handling the matter involving Satsuki," Rio said to Liselotte.

"No problem. I'm sure His Majesty will give a favorable answer once he hears of your services. Please look forward to it," Liselotte said with a giggle.

"I will be hopeful." Rio accepted her words as flattery. However, Francois would come to rate this incident much more highly than Rio was imagining.

"See you again, Aria. I was so happy to speak to you again." Celia also wrapped up her goodbyes with her old friend.

"Same here. I was relieved to see you were safe. Let's talk again if you have the chance to visit Amande."

"Yup. I may be visiting the estate again for a dinner party in the future, so on that occasion."

"I cannot wait," Aria smiled gently at Celia and nodded. A short distance away, Aria's colleagues—including Cosette and Natalie—watched on.

"So Aria actually had friends outside of work."

"Right? I thought work was her friend."

Surprised at the glimpse of a face she didn't normally show, the attendants whispered amongst themselves curiously.

"I can hear you, you know," Aria said coldly.



That afternoon, Rio and the others finally arrived in Rodania. After landing on the giant lake beside the fortress city, they sailed towards the harbor.

The crew swiftly prepared for them to get off the ship, and they finally disembarked. First went the royal siblings, Christina and Flora, escorted by Vanessa across the ramp connecting to the harbor.

They were followed by Rio, a hooded Celia hiding her face, Kouta and Rei, then Duke Huguenot, Roanna, and Hiroaki. Celia was hiding her face with a hood because Charles was still unaware that she was traveling together with them. Charles was to disembark after them and it wouldn't be good if he realized Celia was here and made a commotion on his way to the prison, so they decided to hide her face for the time being.

An enchanted ship had been sent in advance to send word of Christina's arrival, so the high-ranked nobles of the Restoration were all lined in a row in the harbor. When they spotted Christina behind Vanessa, they all placed their hand over their chests and bowed their heads in a show of respect.

"Whoa..."

"That's incredible."

Kouta and Rei were overwhelmed by that sight. The princess was the one being shown respect, but it gave them the illusion that they had become important people too. Hiroaki must have been shown this respect since he arrived in this world as a hero, so his arrogance suddenly made sense. Though he was rather quiet for the time being...

It had been difficult to tell during Kouta and Rei's travels on the run, but it was at this moment they were reminded that Christina was truly a princess.

Then, from the mass of nobles that had gathered to greet them, one man in remarkably fancier clothes than the rest stepped forward. It was the Rodan marquess.

"Welcome, Princess Christina," he said in greeting, stepping out in front of the others.

“Thank you for the reception,” Christina said as she looked around at her surroundings.

Donned in a spare dress borrowed from Flora, she was beautiful and orderly, giving off the imposing sense of royalty. She wasn’t particularly lavishing her charms about, but the younger male nobles were all captivated by her beauty.

“I am unworthy of such words. We have all waited for this day with every fiber of our being. According to the reports, we’ve heard that Your Highness has taken captive Charles, the right-hand man of our archenemy Duke Arbor, and Sir Alfred Emarle, the King’s Sword. How splendid indeed!” Marquess Rodan praised Christina while beaming.

“The capture of Charles and Alfred was the work of Sir Amakawa. Make sure you give him the warm welcome of a state guest.”

“As you wish,” Marquess Rodan bowed. “Now... We can’t have Your Majesty standing around speaking for any longer. Let us move locations. I must also prepare for your welcome.”

“Yes. But first, can I entrust the transport of the prisoners to you?”

Christina turned to face the enchanted ship behind her. Alfred and Charles appeared at the top of the ramp, restrained in cuffs.

“Ooh...”

The nobles all stirred noisily at that sight. The two of them were well-known figures in Beltrum—Alfred being the strongest knight of the kingdom. They were aware of this from the advance notice they received, but seeing the actual prisoners was still surprising.

Alfred ignored the gazes, standing with dignity.

“Guh...” Charles averted his eyes, humiliation on his face.

“Lead them away,” Duke Huguenot sneered, ordering the knight leading them by the chains connected to their cuffs.

“Yes, Sir!”

The knights pulled them down the ramp by the chains. They then led them elsewhere while under the eyes of the public.

After observing that, Rio and the others also began to walk.



Afterwards, Rio and the others relocated to the guest house beside Marquess Rodan's home. A small party could be held in one room. It was still afternoon, but after taking into consideration their fatigue from traveling, it was decided the welcome party would be held without waiting for the night hours.

The attendants were kept to the minimum, participation restricted to a select few nobles chosen by Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan. However, even then there were over a hundred nobles in the venue, as well as chefs, maids, and musicians, so the venue was bustling with people. The format of the party was that of a stand-up buffet, so people were constantly moving and holding conversations all over the room.

At the very back of the venue were Christina, Flora, and Celia, as well as Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan. Incidentally, Hiroaki's absence from the feast had been explained as him feeling unwell, and Roanna was keeping him company.

"However, I never imagined Your Highness would be accompanied by Lady Celia. And with her fiancé Charles Arbor in tow!" Marquess Rodan said with a curious look in his eye.

The events of her rescue were explained to him as they had been to Duke Huguenot, but he was understandably intrigued by the circumstances.

"Professor Celia is too good to be married to a man like that," Christina said.

"Hahaha! Indeed, Lady Celia is a genius far better than he deserves." Marquess Rodan laughed heartily, but the strong-willed curiosity in his eyes didn't fade.

"We cannot inconvenience Count Claire who is still affiliated with the main government, so Professor Celia's affiliation with us shall be kept as secret as possible for the time being. It may be difficult to hide internally, but it could also interfere with the investigations—ensure that no word of this reaches Charles' ears," Christina warned.

There were probably spies among them, so Christina didn't think they could

prevent word of Celia's presence in the Restoration from reaching the main government, but whether that fact was announced publicly or not changed the circumstances. Besides, with Charles as a hostage, nothing would happen to Count Claire.

"I am aware. You can count on it," Marquess Rodan agreed.

"Everyone present here has received an explanation and shares the same understanding. Sir Amakawa's great efforts have also been widespread, making him the center of attention," Duke Huguenot said, looking at Rio, who was surrounded by young noblewomen a short distance away.

You were the one who tempted the ladies towards him, and you have the nerve to say that? Christina thought with a small sigh. Banquets like this were a place for nobles to meet new people, so as long as the inconvenience caused no real harm, not even she could make direct criticism.

However, the seductive techniques of such ladies would probably have little effect on him, as he was normally surrounded by young women like Celia and Sara. In fact, Rio was responding in a friendly manner, but seemed a little uncomfortable. It wasn't just Christina's imagination.

"Hmph..." Celia puffed up her cheeks in a slight pout.



Meanwhile, elsewhere at the party venue, Kouta and Rei were reaching for the extravagant dishes on the tables.

"Hmm, the food's good. But there's still a discrepancy here, Kouta," Rei said, watching Rio be surrounded by women.

"Well... It's only natural for Haruto to be popular. He's as cool as Rui; he's strong and as high-ranking as a noble." He was perfect with no faults, Kouta explained.

"Stop it. You're just making us seem more pitiful."

"You started it..."

"Anyway, we've followed them all the way here, but what do we do now? Princess Christina said she'd look after our living necessities if we stay here,

but... Ooh, this meat is good.” Rei stuffed his cheeks with a steak that had been neatly sliced on a plate.

“Talk or eat. Pick one...” Kouta said tiredly.

“We’re finally able to eat a warm meal, and I don’t wanna let it get cold. So, what do we do? If they’ll let us live here then we’ll be okay for now, at least.”

“If we’re going to live here, then I’d like to have some kind of job, personally. I don’t just want to be looked after, I want to be able to stand independently,” Kouta said with a hint of ardor.

“Hmm. You’ve grown, Kouta,” Rei said earnestly. He believed Kouta wouldn’t have been able to sound so reliable if he were still bothered by Rui and Akane’s relationship.

“Don’t make fun of me. What do you want to do, then?” Kouta turned away in embarrassment and asked Rei.

“What do I want? I... want to live an easy life,” Rei said honestly.

“The words of a useless human...”

“Rude. Everyone thinks like that at least a little. Anyway... With all this, I could probably keep living here. The food’s good, and I’m getting full.”

“I see...”

Indeed, living here would be the safe option. However, Kouta wanted to be able to face Rui again proudly, so he wanted to be a better person. Would that be fulfilled by living a carefree life here? He wondered to himself.

“Unrelated, but don’t you find that these buffet style meals tend to fill you up faster than normal? How strange.” Rei exhaled, placing his plate down on a nearby table.

“No, I’m pretty sure you ate a lot... You probably didn’t notice because you were trying all kinds of dishes a little at a time,” Kouta answered in exasperation.

“Excuse me, do the two of you have a moment?” someone called out to them. It was a group that consisted of two middle-aged men and two pretty girls that appeared to be their daughters.

“Ah, yes. What is it?” Rei straightened his posture reflexively.

“Oh, we just wanted to talk to you two. I am the baron Dirk Dandy, and this is baron Gilbert Belmond. A relative of mine.”

“Erm, I’m Rei Saiki. This is my underclassman, Kouta Murakumo. It’s nice to meet you.”

Rei returned the greeting in the Strahl way awkwardly.

Behind him, Kouta bowed his head nervously. “Nice to meet you,” he added.

“Hahaha, there’s no need to be so stiff. That’s right—allow me to introduce our daughters. Go on,” Baron Dandy said in a friendly manner, turning to their daughters. The two pretty girls standing behind them stepped forward.

“My name is Rosa Dandy.”

“I’m Mikaela Belmond.”

Rosa and Mikaela both bowed their heads gracefully. The two of them were slightly younger than Rei and Kouta, with pretty facial features. They exuded an air of modesty and elegance.

“It’s nice to meet you two. You can call me Rei.” Rei’s expression tightened sharply, his voice taking on a prominent tone as he bowed in a gentlemanly manner. However, the unfortunate destiny of all men drew his gaze towards the open chest of her dress. Especially towards Rosa, whose breasts swelled at a size slightly disproportionate for her age.

Oooh! Kouta! Our time has finally come!

With his head still bowed down, Rei glanced over at Kouta with glee.

Rei, stop being an embarrassment. Really.

Ashamed by Rei’s sudden change in attitude, Kouta’s face twitched as he tried his best to maintain a smile on his face. However, Rosa and Mikaela giggled, finding their attitude amusing.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir Rei. Feel free to call us by our first names as well,” Rosa suggested.

“Gladly, Miss Rosa, Miss Mikaela,” Rei nodded calmly.

“Is it okay to refer to you by your first name as well?” Mikaela asked Kouta.

“Ah, sure. I don’t mind...” Kouta agreed a little nervously.

“Thank you very much. It’s very nice to meet you, Sir Kouta.”

“Yeah, same here...” Kouta’s breath was taken away by Mikaela cheerfully addressing him.

After that, lively conversation unfolded between them for a while. As expected of nobility, the barons and their daughters were masterful in the art of conversation, easing Rei into becoming more talkative and Kouta into relaxing. Rosa naturally drew closer to Rei while Mikaela approached Kouta.

“Are you sure you should be talking to us? To be honest, we’re not all that important,” Rei suddenly asked, as though the thought just came to mind.

“Hahaha, that isn’t the case at all. You seemed to be engrossed in the food earlier, so it was difficult to call out to you. We were waiting for a chance to approach this entire time,” Baron Dandy said with a gentle smile.

“I-I see... Well this is embarrassing.” Rei accepted those words with a bashful look. Indeed, he had immediately moved to the food when the banquet started. It seemed his own actions were what prevented the nobles from speaking to them. Kouta’s face also reddened in realization.

“However, it’s also true that the people you accompanied were a little too extravagant. There was Her Highness, Princess Christina, Count Clare’s daughter, Lady Celia, and even the Galarc Kingdom’s honorary knight, Sir Amakawa,” Baron Dandy said, looking around at the area where the aforementioned people were.

“Will you not be going to greet Her Highness and the others?” Kouta asked.

“Though we are nobles, we are merely at the bottom rung of the ladder. We cannot speak to those higher ranked than us so easily. These events may make it seem like we’re just having pleasant chats with each other, but there’s a proper sequence and etiquette involved in these conversations.” Baron Belmond humbled himself and answered with a strained smile.

That being said, a bottom-tier noble wouldn’t have been invited by Duke

Huguenot and Marquess Rodan to this event. Both Baron Dandy and Baron Belmont were low-ranked nobles, but they had climbed up to a fixed position and were given permission to participate today.

“I see... That must be difficult.” Kouta was reminded of just how suffocating noble society was.

“At least we aren’t nobles, then. You can feel free to talk to us as a break from it all,” Rei said jokingly.

“You are so funny,” Rosa giggled.

“It seems like the two of you are enjoying yourselves.”

Just then, Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan made their way over. It was the entrance of the two great nobles that the Restoration boasted in.

“G-Good day.”

“All thanks to you.”

Kouta and Rei both greeted them politely. The barons also bowed their heads in a show of respect.

“Oh, you can all be at ease. This isn’t a formal party, after all. Come to think of it, I have yet to introduce myself to the two of you directly. My apologies for the delay, I am George Rodan. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Marquess Rodan introduced himself to Kouta and Rei with a friendly smile.

“We were the ones who were late to introduce ourselves. I apologize for being rude. My name is Rei Saiki,” Rei said immediately.

“I’m Kouta Murakumo. It’s nice to meet you,” Kouta added quickly.

“Mhmm. It’s an honor to meet the two who were summoned alongside the great hero.”

“Indeed. I’ve heard the two of them are also quite talented.”

Marquess Rodan and Duke Huguenot immediately complimented Kouta and Rei.

“Not at all. We’re just the bonus dregs that were summoned along with the hero,” Rei shook his head modestly.

“Hahaha, there’s no need to be so humble. I’ve heard that the two of you were highly educated where you came from,” Marquess Rodan said.

“Ah, well... It’s no big deal...”

Rei and Kouta exchanged frowns. The two of them knew they were nothing more than regular high school students in Japan.

Compulsory education didn’t exist in this world, so they indeed had a little more knowledge compared to the boys and girls here, but that was because the bar was low when it came to their surroundings, and not because they were superior. They were aware of this.

Besides, they had met plenty of people from this world that were smarter than them—they had even traveled with them.

“They’re plentiful in magic essence and are blessed with talent as sorcerers too, George,” Duke Huguenot said to Marquess Rodan casually.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Marquess Rodan’s admiration was almost exaggerated.

“We’ve heard that we have lots of essence, but we haven’t gotten much training in magic,” said Kouta. All they could use was the enchantment for physical ability, *Augendae Corporis*, as well as some lower-class attack spells.

“If I may say this for your own good—if you have a talent, you should try to develop it. There’ll be plenty of opportunities for the two of you in the future.”

“Mhmm. The two of them seem too humble for their own good. However, we should refrain from placing too much pressure on the youth. Please enjoy the party today. You may meet someone wonderful, you know?” Marquess Rodan echoed Duke Huguenot’s sentiments and laughed jokingly as he looked at Rosa and Mikaela.

“Haha, we’ve already met some wonderful people,” Rei replied enthusiastically, lured into glancing over at Rosa.

Rei really gets full of himself as soon as a cute girl pays him any attention.

This was nothing new, but Kouta sighed at the appearance of his upperclassman’s old habit.

Marquess Rodan was smiling, a sharp light flickering in his eyes for a moment. “Oh, that is quite fortuitous then. If there’s a lady that catches your eye, you should move boldly and swoop in. Though you may find yourself up against rivals and fiances,” he said with a suppressed smile, stirring a sense of panic in Rei.

“True, the competition must be fierce for beautiful people. Like Miss Rosa and Miss Mikaela.” Swept along in Marquess Rodan’s topic, Rei turned to Rosa and Mikaela.

The one who answered wasn’t Rosa, but her father, Baron Dandy. “I may sound like a doting parent, but as they are both very capable women, they’ve received many proposals. But we’ve yet to find a partner for her that meets all of our ideal conditions. As a loving parent, I only want to find the best marriage partner for my beloved daughter, you see...” he said somberly.

When a baron’s daughter married a noble of higher status, she would normally end up as a concubine or second wife of a senile older noble. For nobles with a strong desire to rise in status, they would generally aim to receive added value in marriage with their first wife. Of course, the opposite also applied. Even if the current heads had reached a fixed position, Baron Dandy and Baron Belmont’s houses were the same.

“Hmm. Of course. They’re lovely, after all. Which means it would be out of the question for me to offer myself as Miss Rosa’s partner. Ah, how unfortunate,” Rei nodded deeply, putting on a show of exaggerated disappointment. His experiences up until this point had taught him not to have a single drop of expectation for being popular, but perhaps this could be his chance. It would be a lie to say he wasn’t somewhat hopeful right now.

If anything, Rei had never had such a lively conversation with girls as pretty as them in his life. To be honest, Rosa’s appearance was totally his type.

But at the end of the day, she was probably acting friendly to him because of the social etiquette of nobility. Assuming that was the case, Rei had accepted that this connection would end after they parted ways today, but...

“Hahaha, perhaps it’s a little hasty of you to say that. What do you think, Rosa? You heard Sir Rei.” Baron Dandy laughed heartily and turned to Rosa.

“I’m honored. Sir Rei is a very interesting gentleman,” Rosa replied, not displeased at all.

“Hmm?”

What did that mean? He had expected to be brushed off lightly, so the unexpected answer made Rei cock his head.

“Oh? In that case, how about this. Sir Rei, would you like to meet my daughter privately on a later day? The two of you should get to know each other better first.”

“Huh...? Uh, sure... Wait, what?” Rei nodded, dumbfounded, at Baron Dandy’s question.

Huh? Is this... a promise for a date? Could this be my chance?! Rei belatedly processed the situation.

“I shall look forward to it, Sir Rei.” Rosa bowed cutely, embarrassed but happy.

“No, umm... I’m the one looking forward to it, Miss Rosa,” Rei replied, his voice cracking.

S-Seriously?! My time has come! He rejoiced in his heart. Meanwhile...

“Ugh...” Kouta sighed quietly in exasperation.



The party ended in the evening hours. Rio and Celia would stay in the guest house and were each led to their respective rooms. However, Celia immediately made her way to Rio’s room, as she had something she wanted to discuss.

“I’ll pour some tea. Please sit over there, Celia.” Rio walked over to the kitchenette and began his preparations to welcome Celia as his guest. They were both told the maids of the guest house could be summoned into their rooms to help out, but they were capable of looking after themselves, so there was no need for that.

After Rio promptly finished preparing the tea, he sat down across from Celia, who had seated herself on the sofa.

“Thank you. I’m sorry to intrude upon you when you must be tired from the long journey and welcome party.”

Rio smiled warmly to reassure her. “It’s fine, I’m not tired. Are you sure you’re not the one that’s tired, Celia? You’re not used to long journeys and it’s been a while since you’ve attended a party like that, right?”

“I am a bit tired, but there were many familiar faces at the party. It was fresh and fun seeing them again after such a long time. Though it was a little bit mentally tiring as well,” Celia smiled softly and shrugged.

“That’s good, then. We weren’t able to talk much during the welcome party, so I was worried.”

Rio had been hounded by nobles from beginning to end, so he hadn’t been able to move freely at all. Celia had been in a similar situation.

“You were surrounded by girls the entire time, after all...” Celia said, watching Rio for his reaction. She must have been watching Rio carefully during the party as well.

“Yes, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of you out of worry,” Rio replied with a somewhat lonely smile.

“Huh? O-Oh. I see. Ahaha.”

Celia was taken aback, her voice rising an octave. She couldn’t look directly at Rio out of embarrassment. She had wanted to ask if he was proposed to, but that thought had completely vanished from her head now.

“T-That aside, Aishia’s still in spirit form, right? It’s just us here, so you should have her come out,” Celia said hastily, changing the topic in a fluster.

“All right.”

Particles of light gathered beside Rio and took the form of Aishia. She proceeded to flop down in the seat beside him. Celia puffed up her cheeks a little, but the thought of only being able to see these two like this for a little longer made her want them to stay like this forever. She swallowed her words and corrected her posture. “Umm, I know it’s a little late to be saying this, but I —I’m going to officially join the Restoration as Princess Christina’s advisor.”

“Okay,” Rio said gently, as though he already knew this.

“I know... I know I’ve caused you, Sara, Orphia, and Alma lots of trouble... I’m sorry for that.” Celia hung her head.

Rio shook his head slowly. “There’s nothing for you to apologize for.”

“You are too kind...”

“Not at all.” Rio nodded happily.

“I have nothing to my name right now, so I can’t do anything but thank you... But I’ll definitely repay you for this one day,” Celia vowed, firmly expressing her intentions.

“I don’t really mind... Oh, that’s right. I forgot I had to give you this. *Dissolvo*.” Rio recited the spell to discharge the Time-Space Cache. The space above the table warped, and a small pouch packed to the brim appeared.

“What’s inside of it?” Celia wondered, tilting her head.

“Travel funds Count Claire entrusted to me before we left Cleia. There’s one enchanted gold coin, and around 200 regular gold coins.”

“F-From father...? He gave you this much? Even an enchanted gold?” Celia’s eyes widened in shock. Enchanted gold coins were rare coins said to have the value of 100 gold coins. When combined with the 200 gold coins, it was a large sum of money even for nobility.

“Please take it,” Rio said, placing the pouch before Celia.

“I can’t. You keep this, Rio. No matter how you look at it, this sum includes your reward. I’m sure Father said the same, didn’t he?” Celia shook her head and pushed the pouch packed with coins back towards Rio.

“Did he? I can’t quite seem to recall. I accepted it in the name of travel expenses, but... At any rate, I have no need for this money. It originally belonged to your father, and you’ll need it to pay for various things for a while, right? You should just accept it and use it.”

In reality, Rio had received it with the agreement that the excess from their travel fees would be his reward, and quite a few extra golds had been added because of that, but Rio pretended not to know anything about it.

I'm definitely going to confirm this with Father the next time we meet!

Celia glared at Rio for a long moment. "Fine, I'll borrow it then. But I'm definitely going to return it." She accepted the money with a slight pout.

Rio nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Also, there's one more thing." He held his index finger up.

"What is it...?" Celia looked a little wary.

"I'm receiving an estate in Rodania as a reward for the incident this time. But I have no intention of living here, so would you like to stay there in my stead?" Rio said.

"Y-Your home...?" Celia was speechless. She had considered renting a house for a while, but she hadn't expected to have a whole estate handed to her.

"Yes. Out of formalities, the ownership will have to be handed to me, but after that I can transfer it to you. I'll be shown around the potential properties tomorrow, so once all the paperwork is done I'll hand all the papers to you—"

"W-Wait! Hold a minute! You can't do that!" Celia interrupted Rio's words in a fluster. "You can leave everything in your name, and store all the papers yourself. Please!" she protested.

"But even if I own a mansion, I won't be able to manage it myself."

"I'll manage it. I have a job lined up, so I'll use the money I earn to pay rent as well. The mansion is something you're receiving for your achievements, right? I cannot accept that," Celia insisted.

"I don't need any rent, though..."

"No. It's a form of distinction for you, so let me pay for it properly," Celia shook her head decisively.

"All right... If you insist."

"Good. Once you're done with all the paperwork, let's write up a formal contract. Sometime before you leave."

Before I leave. He felt somewhat saddened by those words.

"Yes, let's do that..." Rio agreed with a soft tone to his voice.

“Where will you go after this?” Celia asked.

“I’m thinking of heading to the Proxia Empire,” Rio replied in a stiff voice.

“The Proxia Empire... Is that because of Reiss? Or because you’re looking for the person who killed your mother?” Celia pried fearfully.

“Both, I suppose... There’s no mistaking the two of them have something to do with one another, so I’m hoping to track down either one of them.”

If Reiss was the Proxia Empire’s ambassador, there was a chance he would have to sneak into the imperial castle—which he fully intended on doing.

“What will you do about the others...?”

“I will go to the Proxia Empire alone. I’m thinking of leaving the stone house beside Rodania, so you may be able to meet everyone if you wanted to. Aishia will continue to protect you in her spirit form from here on out as well.”

“Really...?” Celia looked at Aishia.

“Yup. That way Haruto can travel at ease too.” Aishia nodded slowly.

“Right. But before I leave again, we still have that meal planned at Liselotte’s estate. I plan on heading to Amande sometime soon to adjust the date with her.”

“I see. Then I can meet Miharuru and Latifa again.”

“Yes.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Celia beamed.

“There’s one more thing I’d like to give you,” Rio added.

“Huh...?” Celia frowned warily.

Funds for her near future had been prepared for her, a house had been prepared for her, and she even had Aishia as her guard for a while. What else would he give her on top of all that?

“There’s no need to be so on guard. With Aishia here to defend you, we have to address the issue of essence supply. This is an item to resolve that,” Rio said, placing a metal bracelet on the table. The amount of magic essence consumed while in spirit form was trivial and could be naturally recovered by absorbing

the essence in the air, but spirits took up a lot more energy when in their material form.

“What’s this...?”

“A magic artifact that uses a spirit stone. Spirit stones are able to store magic essence, so if Aishia ever has to materialize, this should supply her with enough magic essence. I know you have an extraordinary amount of essence for a human and you can form a temporary path with Aishia to resupply her, but it still isn’t quite enough to use Aishia in her material form.”

In order to cause the supernatural phenomenon of manifesting a spiritual existence, there had to be a significant amount of magic essence consumed in the process. That essence consumption increased exponentially when using spirit arts in combat.

“That’s true... But how much magic essence is stored in this item, then?” Celia asked nervously.

“Who knows? By my rough estimate, it should be enough to fire advanced magic several hundred times, I think? So it should be able to withstand Aishia fighting seriously if needed.”

“S-Several hundred shots of advanced magic?! Wait, wait! This is an artifact, right? It must have had an original purpose when not being used as an emergency measure, right?” Celia asked in shock.

“Well, I suppose you could say that. The original purpose of this artifact was to amplify the output force of the spirit arts and magic spells the wearer uses. Using this artifact can make you capable of firing powerful spells with little essence.”

It was the same type of sorcery embedded in the sword Rio used.

“Amplification of magic... Isn’t this at the level of an ancient artifact...?” Celia was speechless. Was Rio aware of how much worth an item like this had?

“It just uses a good quality spirit stone. I wanted to make other artifacts too, but I didn’t have the stock, so that’ll have to wait for next time.”

“A-Ahaha... I guess this is how my debt to you just continues to grow.” Celia

laughed weakly, hanging her head in dejection.



Celia and Rio wrapped up the conversation early, as Rio had to look at properties the next morning.

“See you tomorrow, then. Have a good night,” Rio said to Celia while seeing her off.

“Yup, see you tomorrow,” Celia grinned.

“Bye, Celia. Good night.” Aishia also bid Celia good night from beside Rio.

“Good night. I’ll be going now.”

Celia looked a little reluctant to leave as she exited Rio’s room. The door clicked shut, leaving Rio and Aishia alone in the room.

“Hold on!”

The door burst back open and Celia marched in.

“Aishia, do you intend on sleeping with Rio tonight?”

“Yup,” Aishia nodded tonelessly.

“You better be in your spirit form, okay” Celia narrowed her eyes at Aishia.

“...Yup.”

“What was that pause?!”

“I can sleep with Haruto as long as I’m in spirit form, right?” Aishia said, recalling that rule they had created.

“That’s right, but you’ve been away from Haruto for a while recently, so you’re really going to sleep in your spirit form, right?” Celia glared at Aishia suspiciously. If she lowered her guard, it was possible for Aishia to sleep clinging to Rio naked. In the stone house, there were people who would warn her after waking up in the morning, but such deterrents didn’t exist here. To be honest, Celia was uneasy.

“...You should sleep with me tonight,” Celia said to Aishia.

“Why?” Aishia cocked her head curiously.

“Because I haven’t seen you in so long. I’m lonely.”

“I’ve been lonely because I haven’t seen Haruto in a long time.”

“Y-You should be fine. You’ll be able to sleep with Rio whenever you want once he comes back from his trip,” Celia protested with a squeak.

“Aishia, could you stay in Celia’s room tonight to make sure no one strange tries to break in? I’m sure no one will, but just in case,” Rio asked Aishia.

“...Her name.”

“Huh?”

“You’re calling Celia by her name.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t call her Professor in front of Princess Christina. I’m not quite used to it yet, but we’re going to go with this from now on.”

“I see.” Aishia smiled softly.

“All right. I’ll sleep with Celia tonight,” she said, easily deciding to go with Celia. Thus, it was decided that Aishia would stay with Celia for the night.





The next morning, Rio and Celia were guided by Marquess Rodan, boarding a carriage that took them to a nearby mansion. They were surrounded by guards and escorts, and were even accompanied by Christina, Flora, and Vanessa.

They stepped down from the carriage at the entrance gates to the estate.

“This is the best property out of those that can be moved into immediately. My apologies for the trouble, but I shall show you around from here on foot. Please, come this way,” Marquess Rodan said, leading the way through the gate.

At the end of the road extending from the entrance of the grounds to the mansion on the hill was a palace slightly too extravagant for a lone noble to live in. The surrounding gardens were well-maintained and blooming with natural beauty.

The mansion is on a hill. There's one gate to enter the grounds. It seems to have been designed to be difficult to break in, at least. The view around the grounds is also open, and a barrier spell should be able to detect any intruders at night.

Rio cautiously surveyed the suitability of the location as he followed Marquess Rodan.

“Most of the nobility affiliated with the Restoration have land in Rodania now. New mansions are being built, but the lack of land is a bit of an issue. That's why this estate is also on the narrower side, but I believe it stands out in other ways,” Marquess Rodan explained as he led the party up the path to the mansion.

From a security perspective, even this is too big... But it's still within a tolerable range for a location. There's also the need to keep up appearances as a noble, so all that's left is whether Celia takes a liking to it.

While Rio was thinking, they arrived at the front door.

Marquess Rodan showed them around the interior of the mansion as well. It had a living space for the servants, plenty of rooms for a family, and had an

interior design aesthetic that clearly cost a lot of money.

With Christina involved in the transfer of property, Marquess Rodan couldn't risk his reputation by offering a cheap mansion. His claim that it was one of the better properties in the domain was probably true.

"What do you think, Haruto?" Celia asked after looking around most of the mansion.

"I think it's good. But I want to prioritize your opinion, Celia, since you'll be the one living here."

There was no doubt they had been introduced to a good property, and he wasn't going to be picky when it was being offered for free.

"If you're fine with it, then I am too. In fact, I think this mansion is wonderful—there aren't many nobles who can have such a nice estate other than the domain lord," Celia commented in awe.

"Hahaha, I'm glad to hear that from you, Celia. What is your opinion, Your Highness?" Marquess Rodan turned to Christina happily.

"If the two of them are fine with it, then I have no objections." Christina shook her head while looking at Rio and Celia. She wanted to give more as a reward, but she wasn't going to insist if the people in question were happy with it.

"I see. In that case, this property shall be transferred to Sir Amakawa. Can this decision be considered finalized, then?" Marquess Rodan checked one last time.

"Yes. Thank you for all that you've done." Rio bowed deeply.

After that, an agreement was made and all paperwork completed within the day, including the contract and title deed.

Furthermore, the written request that Rio had handed to Christina and the Restoration—mostly concerning Celia's treatment and safety—was also accepted and signed as a written oath with confidentiality.

The estate had a basic set of furniture within it, so it was decided that Celia would move in tomorrow before they called it a day.



Two days later, Celia had started living in Rio's estate, and at her insistence, it was decided that he'd stay in the mansion for the duration that he was in Rodania as well.

Rio worried that it wasn't proper for a man to stay overnight with an unmarried noblewoman, but Celia had managed to convince him that it was okay.

Today, Rio had invited Kouta and Rei to the estate. Things had been so busy between capturing Charles and arriving in Rodania, he hadn't really had a chance to talk to them properly, so he wanted to see them before he left again. After preparing tea and snacks, he and Celia made their way to where they were waiting in the drawing room.

"Help yourselves," Rio said.

"Why, thank you."

"Thank you very much."

Both Rei and Kouta were oddly stiff as they reached for the cups.

"Are... Are you two nervous, by any chance?" Celia asked curiously.

"Ah, well, it's just... It's a really impressive mansion." Rei scratched at his head as he answered.

"It made us realize that you two are nobles too..." Kouta added.

"Well, you two are friends of the hero Rui too, right? In this world, that alone is enough to give you a certain amount of social status," Rio pointed out.

"Yeah, but we're not with him anymore... So now we're just regular people..."

"Kouta wants to become an independent man that can stand on his own two feet, without borrowing Rui's power. Just like Haruto."

"R-Rei!" Kouta's face turned red after being outed.

"I see... Though I can't say if I'm the best role model, I think that's a wonderful attitude to have. I'm rooting for you," Rio commended Kouta a little bashfully.

"Indeed," Celia agreed with a grin.

“No, you’re definitely the best... Or rather, you’re so amazing, it’s a little unrealistic of a goal,” Kouta praised Rio.

“That I can agree with,” Rei said with a firm nod.

“Not at all. The two of you are older than me anyway.” Rio shrank back.

“That’s what’s strange, though. For some reason, it just feels like you’re older than us. Maybe it’s because the first impression we had of you fighting was so strong? You’re still 16, right?” Rei asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you really just 16?”

“Yes, I should be...” Since he had memories of his past life, Rio hesitated just a little. However, while he was heavily influenced by the memories of Amakawa Haruto, the base of his personality was still the boy that was born and raised in this world.

It was why he had stronger recognition being 16 years old. Not that he paid much awareness to his age at all outside of situations like this...

“Rei, asking too many questions about that is rude,” Kouta warned.

“R-Right. Well, okay. That aside, I’d like to ask you for a favor—as one man to another... And to Celia as well. Can you give us some advice?” Rei asked.

“Advice about what?”

“About our future.”

“I see. I’d be happy to listen to your thoughts.”

Rui had asked him to keep an eye out for them as well, so Rio agreed readily.

“The truth is, Kouta and I are thinking about going down different paths from now on.”

“Really?” Rio had assumed they would continue to stick together, so this was a little unexpected.

“Well, I don’t have any particular goal at the moment, so I think I’ll still stick with my underclassman for now. But the things we want are different, you could say,” Kouta revealed with a slightly embarrassed blush.

“By which you mean...?”

“Well, I’ll start... Umm, I’m thinking of becoming an adventurer,” Kouta said with a slightly stiff look.

“An adventurer...” Rio looked slightly conflicted.

“If it’s possible, could you tell me your opinion on that, Haruto?”

“It isn’t an easy job... is what I would say. Many of the jobs involve putting your life in danger, the pay is unstable, and your body is your tool of trade, so you’ll lose all income if you fall ill. People tend to assume it’s a quick way of getting rich, but only a select few make fortunes from it. Are you aware what kind of work is involved with being an adventurer?” Rio asked.

“Of course. There’s things like physical labor in the city, herb gathering outside the city, vanquishing monsters, and sometimes fighting as a mercenary,” Kouta confirmed with a completely serious look.

“If you were thinking of becoming one on a whim, I would have advised you against it, but...”

“I’m definitely not making light of the job.”

“So it seems... May I ask the reason why you want to do this?” Rio asked, feeling the strong conviction behind Kouta’s gaze.

“I want to learn the harshness of reality. I still know nothing about this world right now, but I have to be able to live in it. I don’t want to be protected by someone else my entire life. That’s why I want to know more about this world. Someday, I’d like to travel to all different kinds of lands.”

“I don’t think that way of thinking is wrong... But if you’re going to become an adventurer, I believe it would be best for you to receive combat training first. To be honest, your current level of ability would leave me worried,” Rio pointed out rather harshly. During their journey, he had taught Kouta and Rei a little bit about swinging a sword, but they were both complete beginners.

“I know. That’s why I’ll be taking combat lessons with Vanessa and the other knights, thanks to Princess Christina’s kindness. In the meantime, I plan on basing my activities around Amande while taking those lessons and picking safe

jobs to begin with.” Kouta seemed to have placed proper thought into where he was lacking.

“I see... You have it all planned out. In that case, any other warnings I give you will just be needless meddling.”

“No, that’s not true. If you think it won’t work out like this, then that means I’m still too naive.”

“You think too highly of me... I wish I could be of more help to you, but I plan on going on a journey in the near future. I can be a sparring partner for you anytime before then, though, so just say the word if you need one.”

“N-No, I’d just lose in an instant if I fought with you in my current state... But I’d love to ask you for a match once I’m able to hold my own a little. Please knock me down from my high horse when I need it,” Kouta said.

“I understand. In that case, gladly,” Rio nodded generously. Meanwhile, Celia, who had been listening silently, seemed to be happy that Rio had made a friend his age and was watching cheerfully.

“Okay. You’re next, Rei,” Kouta directed.

“Right... Ahem. Umm, I’m thinking of joining the Restoration and aiming to become a real sorcerer. I’ve heard that it’s difficult for commoners to learn magic and sorcery, and... Umm...” Rei cleared his throat a little nervously before speaking of his future plans. However, he became slightly shy towards the end and struggled for words.

“Rei fell in love with a noblewoman in the Restoration, so he wants to become a sorcerer for her sake,” Kouta revealed on his behalf.

“W-We haven’t decided to date officially yet, though!” Rei corrected in a fluster.

“Really...?” Rio said.

“W-When did that happen...?”

Rio and Celia were even more surprised at this than the news of Kouta wanting to become an adventurer.

“The truth is, things have been going well with this girl I met at the party the

first day we came to Rodania..." Rei confessed bashfully.

"I see..."

In all probability, that was likely a part of the Restoration's recruitment activities. Rio and Celia immediately suspected that, but this wasn't exactly a rare case for noble society either. Kouta had probably been recruited as well, but if he was choosing the path of an adventurer, it probably wasn't a very tempting invitation.

While the problem lay in Rei's lack of understanding about noble society, seeing his blissful face as he spoke made it more difficult to say that it was a problem.

"But the thing is, I don't know much about dating girls of nobility. In fact, it's my first time dating a girl at all. As nobles and senior figures, I was hoping to get some advice from you two about this," Rei said, bowing his head at Rio and Celia.

"But..." Rio and Celia looked at each other, frowning.

"Now, now. You two are lovers, aren't you? You can just tell me, like, how you started dating and stuff. How often are you meant to send gifts? What kind of gifts? Anything like that would be a great help."

"Huh...?" There were so many things to correct in what Rei was saying, Rio's reaction was delayed.

After a pause, Celia yelled with a blush on her face. "H-Huh?! L-Lovers?! Ri—Haruto and I?!" She was so shaken, she nearly called Rio by his real name.

"Yes?" Rei nodded.

"I-Is that how we look to you?" Celia asked nervously.

"Yes? You look like a perfectly happy couple living together."

Rei looked at Celia with pure eyes as though to say, "What about it?"

"I-I see..." Celia ducked her head with a bright red face. Meanwhile, Rio looked awkward.

"Huh? Am I wrong?" Rei finally realized the other possibility.

“Yes. We don’t have that kind of relationship...” Rio nodded with a frown.

“W-What?!”

This time, Rei and Kouta were the ones in shock. What they saw of Rio and Celia’s intimacy had made them assume they were lovers with certainty. It was almost like they were a married couple.

“And I’m sorry to say this, Rei, but I have no experience with dating either...”

“Y-You’re telling me such a perfect man has never had a girlfriend before...? I... I suddenly feel like I can relate to you a lot more.” Rei looked at Rio with sparkling eyes.

“No, well... Also, I only became a noble recently, so I think Celia would be more knowledgeable in this topic than me.” At a complete loss, Rio finally sought help from Celia.

“I-I haven’t dated anyone before either! T-Though I *did* have an engagement forced upon me!” Celia protested with a bright red face.



One week later...

“Then as discussed, I’ll be heading to Amande now,” Rio said to Celia after dinner.

“Okay. Have a safe trip. Can I say that...?” Celia asked, watching Rio’s face.

“Yes, of course.”

Celia suddenly grinned bashfully. “...Just to let you know, I’ve found a job. A new academy was recently established for the children of the Restoration nobility. For now, I’ll be working as an instructor there while I continue my research. I might even visit the Galarc Kingdom’s Royal Academy sometime,” she reported, possibly to hide her embarrassment.

“Congratulations. I knew you wouldn’t have any problem finding work, but I’m still a little relieved. I envy the students who get to sit in on your lectures.”

“Ahaha. There’s nothing I can teach you anymore.” Celia laughed shyly, a distant look in her eyes.

“That’s not true. I’m still learning things from you, just like I did in the past,” Rio also said with a distant look.

Celia smiled fleetingly. “Hey, Rio... Do you still remember that time you came to visit me in my room before you left the Beltrum Kingdom?” she said with slight embarrassment.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Our goodbyes were sad back then, but that’s not the case this time. Right?”

“Yes. This time I can proudly show my face to you.”

“You’ll stop by every once in a while, right?”

“Of course. I promise. No matter where I go on this continent, I’ll come see you,” Rio said clearly, nodding.

“Huh...? Ah, umm... Yeah.” Celia blushed faintly and nodded in embarrassment. Then, with a high-pitched voice, she added a little over-eagerly: “T-That’s fine, but what I wanted to say was that we should have a positive farewell! So let’s redo it this time. I don’t want to make it a sad memory like last time... This time we’ll be bright and positive!”

“Redo it? Like last time?” Rio cocked his head at Celia’s words, not quite getting the point.

“Y-Yup. When we said goodbye, you... You hugged me, right? That’s why... Come on, stand up for a bit,” Celia said shyly, standing up and approaching Rio.

“Umm... Okay.” Rio stood up, slightly confused.

“S-Stay still like that.” Celia nervously buried her face in Rio’s chest, then softly entrusted her body to Rio.

Redoing that day... So this is what she meant. I did hug her like this before leaving Beltrum back then. It wasn’t a very happy memory, so I guess she wants to overwrite that.

Rio smiled happily and gently wrapped his arms around Celia. Once he did, Celia squeezed Rio a bit more.

Celia’s warmth was the same as that day, making his heart feel at ease.

“You really have gotten a lot bigger since back then,” Celia looked up at Rio and grinned.

“It feels like you’ve gotten even smaller.”

Celia pouted at Rio’s teasing laugh. “Geez... You’re just a giant.”

“We probably won’t be able to say goodbye like this in front of other people, so I’ll say it now even if it’s a bit early. Rio... Have a good safe trip. Take care,” Celia said peacefully, sending Rio off with those words.

“Yes. I’ll see you later.” Rio also smiled peacefully and nodded. His goodbye with Celia became a warm memory engraved in Rio’s mind.

Chapter 6: A Brief Rest

The next day, before Rio was to depart from Rodania that morning, he visited Christina and Flora.

“In the end, I wasn’t able to settle any of the debt I owe you,” Christina said somberly, seated across from Rio in a drawing room.

Rio shook his head. “You gave me an estate, so I cannot accept any more than this.”

“...I believe the value of your achievement of defeating Alfred is equal to the sword that he owns. And that estate cannot possibly be equal in value to that sword. Thus, I considered giving you Alfred’s sword, but...”

It seemed like she didn’t think Rio had received enough of a reward. The sword Alfred used was a national treasure, which made it priceless in itself...

“There’s no way I could accept a sword like that. Please give that sword to someone worthy instead. I have a sharp enough sword already,” Rio declined politely.

“I understand... In that case, please take this brooch and use it to enter the noble district whenever you come to visit Professor Celia. It will act as an entry pass,” Christina said, removing the brooch she was wearing and entrusting it to Rio.

“Huh...?” Flora, who had been listening silently, made a noise as her eyes widened in surprise.

“What’s wrong, Flora?” Christina asked, but Flora immediately shook her head.

“N-No, it’s nothing.”

“I understand... I shall gratefully accept this.” Rio received Christina’s brooch respectfully. The brooch had the same design as Christina’s official emblem, but Rio had no way of knowing that.

The pause before he accepted the brooch was because he saw Flora's reaction and suspected that the brooch played a larger role than just an entry pass. However, he couldn't voice his complaints about a gift being presented by royalty, so he had no choice but to obediently accept it for now.

"Umm, Sir Haruto, you're heading for Amande after leaving Rodania, right?" Flora changed the subject. She'd probably heard this from Christina, who was already informed of his destination. Incidentally, Christina offered to send him to Amande with an enchanted ship, but he declined by saying he'd run instead.

"Yes. I've promised to meet up with Lady Liselotte. As I've informed Princess Christina already, Celia will be joining me for this in the near future."

"Of course, I don't mind at all. I cannot restrict Professor Celia from seeing her friends—if anything, her expansion of her circle of friends is most welcome for us as well," Christina said, speaking frankly about the merits to the Restoration without concealing anything.

"Thank you very much. I should be returning to Rodania after visiting Amande, so I can come give you a report along with my greeting at that time," Rio offered with a slight bow.

"Unfortunately, we may not be available to meet depending on the date that you return. Both Flora and I plan on visiting the Galarc capital at some point in the near future." It seemed like Christina was also leaving sometime soon.

"Is that so?"

"I must provide an explanation and apology for the deployment of the Beltrum Kingdom's army by the border, and then discuss various other things. Both Flora and I will be away from Rodania for about half a month or so."

"I understand," Rio nodded with another bow.

And here I thought I'd finally have a chance to talk to Sir Haruto... Flora thought in slight disappointment.

Christina observed Flora's expression with a sidelong glance and closed her eyes in thought for a moment. "However, if you plan on visiting Rodania regularly in the future, we would be delighted to see you again. I shall provide a most hospitable reception for you," she said.

“I understand... However, there’s no need to provide any reception.” Rio hesitated at the thought of meeting so frequently, but ultimately decided to nod his head for politeness’ sake.



After wrapping up his farewell with Christina and Flora, Rio returned to the mansion first. There, Celia and Aishia were waiting for him. Aishia had probably sensed his approach.

“I know I just came back, but I’ll be going now.”

They had said their farewells yesterday and chatted a lot this morning, so Rio announced his immediate departure. Dragging things out would only make him more reluctant to leave.

Celia sent him off with a smile. “Yup, have a safe trip.”

“See you later,” Aishia stood beside Rio and said to Celia. She was accompanying him part of the way to the outskirts of Rodania, where the stone house was set up.

“You’ll be coming back right after showing Rio where the stone house is, right? I’ll be waiting, so come back soon,” Celia said.

“Yup,” Aishia replied.

“I should be back from Amande in a week or so, so please take care of Celia in that time, Aishia.”

“Leave it to me,” Aishia nodded.

Thus, Rio set off from Rodania.



After Rio left Rodania on foot, he ran down the road for the time being. The city turned into a tiny dot behind him and eventually disappeared. He checked there was no one around and left the main road, taking off using his spirit arts to fly.

His destination was the stone house. Rio didn’t know where it was set up, so he needed Aishia to show him the way.

“Over there,” she pointed out.

They arrived at the stone house several minutes later; they descended at the edge of the rocky area Aishia had pointed at. The door to the house was already open and an excited Latifa was waving her arms over her head at him. Sara and the other spirit folk girls’ contract spirits had probably detected Aishia’s approach in her material form.

“Welcome back, Onii-chan! Aishia!” Latifa launched herself at Rio as soon as he landed, hugging him tightly. She hugged him like she was trying to make up for his long absence, which had lasted several weeks this time.

“Hey. Good to be home.” Rio petted Latifa’s head gently.

“Oh! Is it true Liselotte invited us to her house?! Can I really go too?!” Latifa looked up at Rio’s face and asked innocently.

“Of course. As long as you want to.”

“I want to go! I’ve been wanting to meet her ever since you told me about her!”

“I’m going to head to Amande and meet with Liselotte to adjust the plans, but I wanted to come here first to talk about that. Will you be participating as well, Miharu?” Rio asked.

“Yes, I’d love to... A-Also, welcome home, Haruto. Long time no see.” Miharu first nodded awkwardly, then acted oddly humble, her voice nervous.

“Yes... I’m home. It’s been a while,” Rio replied a little bashfully. It had been several weeks since he last saw Miharu—perhaps that was why he felt oddly shy right now.

“Now, let’s go inside.” Sara clapped her hands and started walking towards the door.

“Let’s go, Onii-chan.” Latifa immediately cut around Rio and grabbed his arm, dragging him inside the house first.



Once everyone sat down on the sofas, Rio decided to bring up the dinner party. “With Latifa and Miharu’s participation decided and Liselotte, Celia, and

Aishia's attendance, all that's left is to wait for Satsuki to get permission to go out and the dinner party can be held. There should be a total of seven people, including me."

"Hopefully she gets permission! No, she *has* to get permission! But..." Latifa was speaking energetically, but then she looked up at Rio's face and stared.

"What's wrong...?" Rio faltered under the strange pressure he felt.

"Onii-chan's saying Celia's name without using a title!"

Latifa had picked up on it. Sara, Orphia, Alma had faces like they were expecting that reaction, but both Latifa and Miharuru were wide eyed at hearing this for the first time.

This again...? It seemed like this topic was a greater problem than he ever expected.

"Why are you doing that?!" Latifa leaned in forcefully.

"We were escorting the princess to Rodania. I couldn't call her Professor in front of the others," Rio answered, frowning.

"Hmm... I guess... How nice."

"I already call you by your name, Latifa."

"I know that! But suddenly changing the way you address each other makes it feel like you've gotten closer!"

He'd been calling her Latifa since the beginning, which was why she was protesting out of envy at being unable to experience the same thing.

"That's a little unreasonable..." Rio winced.

"Everyone else is envious too, right?! You all want Onii-chan to speak to you like that too, right?" Latifa bluntly asked all the girls present.

Sara, Orphia and Alma exchanged looks. "Well..."

"Well?"

"When we discussed it, we agreed it would be really embarrassing for that to actually happen," Orphia answered Latifa with a giggle.

“Hmph... I suppose I get that too. As for Aishia...”

“I’ve been addressed this way from the start. I’m fine with this,” Aishia answered plainly.

“I see... What about you, Miharuru?” Latifa asked Miharuru last.

“Huh? M-Me?”

“Yup! Do you want Onii-chan to call you by your name?”

“H-Haruto calling me by my name...?” Miharuru glanced at Rio.

Miharuru. Rio’s voice played in her head.

“I-I wonder...?” Miharuru’s face was bright red.

“So you do.” Latifa decided by herself.

“T-That’s not true! ...I think?” Miharuru refused reflexively, but ended her words with a question.

“Her thoughts immediately show on her face,” Sara said with a slightly scornful look.

“I believe the same applies to you, Sara. Well, Miharuru’s case is a little unique.” For once, Alma agreed with Sara.

That’s... That’s because it’s different than being called Mii-chan!

Miharuru couldn’t explain this in words, so she protested in her mind.

“Umm...” Rio raised his hand awkwardly. He realized there would be no end to this otherwise. Everyone’s eyes gathered on him. He cleared his throat. “I have a somewhat... No, I have a very serious topic to discuss, so let’s move on for now.”

“A very serious topic...?” Sara’s face turned stern.

“It’s about Latifa...” Rio looked at the girl seated beside him.

“Me?” Latifa blinked.

“Yes, it’s about your past. To be honest, I wondered if it was right to bring it up as a topic of discussion, but if you’re all participating in the dinner party, then I believe it’s something that should be addressed.”

“Sure... What is it?” A slight shadow fell over Latifa’s face, but she nodded with a serious expression and encouraged Rio to continue. She didn’t want to remember her past, but she trusted him.

She knew, unconditionally, that the reason why he looked so torn right now was because he pondered and pondered over this topic before bringing it up. Besides, she knew she didn’t mind the people present right now hearing about her past.

“Sara and the others know this already, but Latifa used to be a slave.” Rio began with the facts, but was immediately interrupted.

“Umm, actually, Miharu knows about that already. I told her before. Including how I was raised as an assassin,” Latifa corrected.

“Really?” Rio asked in surprise.

“Yup. Back when Miharu was still in the village, she consulted with me about whether she should attend the banquet or not. I told her about my past then.”

“I see...”

“Yeah. Sorry for interrupting. Go on, Onii-chan,” Latifa said in a more mature way than normal.

“The truth is... The nobleman who raised Latifa as a slave could be part of the Restoration,” Rio finally revealed.

“Huh?!” Everyone other than Aishia was shocked.

“I-Is that true?” Latifa asked fearfully.

“Yeah. His name is Gustav Huguenot. He is the head of a ducal house, with an eldest son named Stewart.”

“Stewart...” Latifa’s expression turned bitter. She’d never forget that name. He was the one who made her call him Big Brother and came to Latifa’s cell to toy with her whenever he was bored. He never acted too violent to injure her in a way that would hinder her assassination work, but he abused her however he wanted up to being able to treat her with the healing magic *Cura*.

“W-Wait a moment! Gustav Huguenot— isn’t that Duke Huguenot’s name?” Sara said in a panic, checking if she had the right person.

“Indeed. Other than Princess Christina and Princess Flora, he’s the highest ranked nobility within the Restoration.”

“That man did something like that to Latifa...” Sara gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

“The possibility is extremely likely, but it’s still a possibility. I apologize for keeping quiet about this. I wanted to explain this matter in front of Latifa, as it concerned her.”

“N-No, we don’t mind that part at all, but...” Sara shook her head at Rio’s apology. She wasn’t able to identify the man herself, as she hadn’t heard anything about his name or face from Latifa. The Collar of Submission that had been used to order Latifa to commit suicide if she was ever questioned was removed, but she still hadn’t told them his name, just in case. However, she would surely be able to identify him by seeing his face.

“I thought it best to discuss this because by attending this dinner party, Latifa will at least gain some kind of connection to nobility. That, and if she ever goes to Rodania with Sara and the others to visit Celia, it’s very likely that she’ll encounter him.”

“I see...” The girls accepted his words with thoughtful looks.

“I’ve hidden the truth of Latifa’s past from Liselotte and informed her that due to certain circumstances, Latifa’s name shouldn’t be revealed to any Beltrum nobles. That’s why the dinner party will be held within Liselotte’s estate with select attendees only. She also went to negotiate with the king for permission to have Satsuki visit her.”

“We didn’t have time to speak to her personally, but she seems like a very good person,” Orphia said softly.

“She is. That’s why Latifa’s secret will be safe with Liselotte if they are to become acquainted in the future, but visiting too often may cause rumors to spread. And so, it would be inconvenient for Latifa to use her current name while in Amande. She’ll probably need to use an alias. That’s why I thought to explain everything properly, as this’ll affect her future greatly.” Rio looked at Latifa. “What do you want to do from here onwards? If you want to go to places other than Amande, you may need to act under an alias like I’ve been doing. I

haven't told Liselotte your name yet, so you can act like it's your real name. Of course, if you continue living in this house as you have, it shouldn't pose much of a problem. If you want to go outside but don't want to be near Duke Huguenot, I'll do something about it. That's why I'd like to hear your thoughts about all this."

He was unusually intense in confirming her intentions.

"Onii-chan..." Latifa bit her lip. It hurt to recall Duke Huguenot, but she was happy Rio had thought about her this much.

"Of course, you don't have to answer right away. Take some time to think about it," Rio said, breathing a small sigh to calm his heart.

"I... If I'm allowed to, then I want to see more of the world outside the village. I don't want to see the person who made me into a slave, but if I can stay beside you as your little sister, I want to travel even more. If I end up seeing that person while going to Rodania to visit Celia, then I'll endure it. Of course, I'll have to do it under an alias," Latifa said, conveying her feelings carefully.

"I see... I understand," Rio nodded slowly and deeply.

"But I want to meet Liselotte as my real self. I want to see her and have her know about the real me. That's why I want to visit her as Latifa and not under an alias. Is that okay?" Latifa confessed further, peering at Rio's face.

"Why wouldn't it be? If that's what you want, then we can explain to Liselotte that way. Leave it to me." Rio assured her with a thump of his fist against his chest.

"Thank you, Onii-chan!" Latifa hugged Rio, overcome with emotion. Miharu and the others looked on with pleasant smiles.

The next day, Rio visited Liselotte's estate and informed her of Latifa's thoughts. Fortunately, Francois had given permission for Satsuki to go out, so Liselotte was able to report that the dinner party was to go ahead as planned.

Thus, the date for the dinner party was set to three weeks from then, where Rio had to participate in party games in the name of deepening their relationship. Many dramatic events happened, and everyone had quite the lively, warm, and relaxing time together.

Another week after that, Rio said goodbye to a worried Miharuru and the other residents of the stone house, then finally departed for the Proxia Empire.

Interlude: Consultation

In the Proxia Empire's capital of Nidgard, in a particular room of the imperial castle...

Having lost the battle at the kingdom border and narrowly escaping from the spirit folk girls with their lives, Arein, Lucci, and Ven were visiting a certain man to give their report.

However, the difference in the man compared to the last time they saw him was so dramatic, Arein and the others could only gulp nervously at the atmosphere in the room. The man spoke to them in an awfully displeased voice, asking what they wanted.

The air in the room made it hard to admit that they had the tables turned on them by some brats, but they had no choice but to report the truth. Then, once they came to the topic of Rio— “What did you just say...?” Anger overflowed from the man.

“Eek...” The three men were paralyzed with heart-stopping fear.

“Hey. Where's that bastard, Reiss, right now?” the man asked.

“Mister Reiss went to see the emperor...” Arein answered with bated breath.

The man immediately stood up. “That bastard is my prey. Dammit, Reiss,” he cursed under his breath as he left the room, leaving Arein, Lucci, and Ven behind.

Honestly, it was hard to tell if they were even still alive. They had felt greater fear for their lives just now than during the earlier battle with Rio and the others. It was their first time seeing that man so furious before.

The room was silent for a long time. Eventually, they exchanged looks and calmed down enough to speak again.

“Well, shit. What happened to the commander in the time we didn't see him?” Lucci muttered with a grimace.



Meanwhile, on an upper floor balcony of the main castle building...

"I was surprised you showed your face again, but to think you had more to discuss... You're like a phantom, coming and going as you please. Or perhaps I should say like a demon instead?" Emperor Nidoll Proxia said to Reiss, who was standing nearby.

"Good grief. It's all because you can't move around freely that I have to devote myself to working behind the scenes. Although my name has started to spread recently, thanks to a certain boy... How troublesome it is. Truly," Reiss lamented with a sigh.

"I see. So your discussion has to do with that boy?"

"Indeed. However, let's wait for him to join us first. I sent Arein and the others to give him their report, so he should arrive soon—oh, speak of the devil."

Nidoll and Reiss' gazes were drawn to the corner of the balcony.

"Hey, Reiss." Lucius had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, arriving on the balcony.

"Why, long time no see, Sir Lucius. We were waiting for you. I'm glad to see you're in good health."

"Don't call me by that insincere title—it's not like you feel any respect towards me. How sickening. Whenever you call me that, it's normally to force some horrible situation on me," Lucius said bluntly, shooting a fed up look at Reiss' overly friendly greeting.

"But I've been trying to keep up the title while addressing you before the other squad members... Oh well. Have you heard the story from Arein and the others yet?"

"You told me not interfering would be for the best, then you made a move on the bastard yourself." Lucius glared at Reiss with daggers in his eyes.

"I had no other choice, though. He kept appearing at the worst possible timing to hinder our plans. It's happened so often, it almost feels like we're

connected by fate.” Reiss gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

“The bastard’s my prey. Don’t do anything unnecessary...”

“Don’t glare at me so much. At any rate, you need to recuperate until you grow accustomed to the new parts of your body. During that time, I need to keep moving to execute the plan—it’s thanks to this that I was able to locate him, you know?”

“Where is that bastard now? Rodania? Or Amande?”

“I cannot tell you that yet. If I did, you’d go running to him right away, no?”

“You say that, but you just want to get the jump on me.”

“Nonsense. If anything, I’m trying to prepare an opportunity for you to reunite with him. If you follow my instructions, that is.”

“...I can’t trust you.” Lucius looked at Reiss with suspicion.

“We shouldn’t interact with him. I did indeed think this way, but after comparing the demerits of interfering with him versus the demerits of leaving him alone, the risks for the latter just happened to come out on top. That’s why I worried myself sick over what to do, and ultimately decided to deal with him. If he ends up on the battlefield of the final stage of our plan, I fear there would be no recovering from the situation.”

Nidoll expressed his interest for the first time at those words. “Is the boy that strong?”

Reiss placed a hand against his mouth and hummed in thought before giving his evaluation of Rio’s abilities. “Well, yes... I first thought he was of the same class as the heroes that fought during the Divine War era, but after witnessing him fight, I realized I underestimated him. He’s either at an awakened hero class, or—impossible as it may be—something close to the transcendent ones of old.”

“Interesting...” Nidoll’s mouth twisted upwards in a grin.

“The bastard is *my* prey,” Lucius warned Nidoll with a frown.

“Heh. You’ve already had a crushing defeat once, no? Where you lost your left eye and arm,” Nidoll looked between Lucius’ face and left arm and sneered.

There was an eyepatch over his left eye. His left arm had been burned into ashes by Rio, but was still there somehow.

“As compensation for the eye and arm, how about I end you first?” Lucius raised his left arm threateningly.

“Oh?” Nidoll smiled challengingly, sparking the air between them.

“Stop it, you two. Now is not the time for infighting.”

“I don’t recall ever joining this guy’s circle,” Lucius snapped at Reiss’ mediation.

“Good grief... Didn’t you want to fight him?”

“I will. But he’s my prey. I won’t let anyone else get in the way.”

“In your current state, you’d only be at a great hero class of the Divine War. You still lack the power to fight him head-on.”

“I wonder about that.” Lucius glared at Reiss, refusing to back down in the slightest.

Dear me. He’s more twisted than I expected. That being said, we’ll need his strength in order to defeat that boy. Hmm... What to do... Reiss thought, then shook his head grandly.

“I understand. For now, you should come with me to Rubia Kingdom. I have business to take care of there first. If you give me your assistance, I shall prepare a stage for you two to fight without interference. I will explain my plan for this after my other matter has been settled,” he offered to Lucius as compromise.

Lucius glared at Reiss silently for a moment, but eventually nodded his head. “Fine.”

“Splendid. We’ll be bringing Arein, Ven, and Lucci, so tell them to prepare for the journey. I’ll be coming to get them soon.”

“Hmph.” Lucius snorted, then turned and jumped from the balcony without another word.

“So that’s the story, but could I ask you for a favor too, Nidoll?” Reiss turned

back to Nidoll and said cheerfully.

“What a wicked face. I’ve been growing bored of life in the castle. This suggestion better provide some form of entertainment, I hope?” Nidoll asked in annoyance.

“Of course. There’s an extremely high chance that the aforementioned boy will break into this castle. However, it would be bad for him to hold too much interest in the Proxia Empire. That is where I’d like to ask you to pass on a message to him.”

“Oh? Fine. Let’s hear it.” Nidoll’s mood was suddenly lifted.



Meanwhile, Lucius returned to the room where Arein and the others were.

“C-Commander!” The three of them promptly stood up at his appearance.

“Hey, Lucci. Gather as many disposable teleportation crystals as you can—immediately. And keep it a secret from Reiss.”

“Huh...?” Lucci was bewildered by the sudden order from Lucius.

“What are you doing? We’re leaving right away. Make it quick. Reiss will be here soon.”

“R-Right!” Scolded by Lucius, Lucci quickly ran out of the room.

I have no intention of being your pawn, Reiss, Lucius thought with a livid face, throwing himself down on the sofa roughly.

Chapter 7: Secret of the Proxia Empire Castle

One week after the dinner party with Satsuki and Liselotte, Rio visited the imperial capital of the Proxia Empire, Nidgard. He was practically certain that Reiss was the ambassador of the Proxia Empire, and with his connection to Lucius, there was no way he could disregard this country any longer.

He moved by flying with his spirit arts, landing off the road close to the capital, then made the rest of his way on foot. Outside the castle walls were unprotected residential areas.

It's a fairly big city. Enough to proclaim itself an empire, I suppose.

In terms of city size alone, it probably surpassed that of both capitals of the Galarc Kingdom and the Beltrum Kingdom. However, the urban development outside the walls was rather negligent, and public safety didn't seem too fantastic, either. There was a somewhat heavy atmosphere in the air.

Compared to the gloom outside the castle walls, the castle sure is splendid...

Rio gazed up at the imperial castle in the distance and thought to himself. The castle in his field of view was truly luxurious and magnificent.

What's that barrier?

From a distance, Rio could see there was a barrier set up around the Proxia Castle. It was cleverly hidden, but there were faint traces that could be detected. When he stared hard enough, he realized there was a cylinder-shaped barrier set up around the entire castle.

In the first place, the spell that formed the barrier was complex—in terms of Strahl region standards, it was still a sorcery difficult to put into practical use. Even so, there were some kingdoms that had partially analyzed ancient magic artifacts and put them into limited practical use. However, the cost of continuously maintaining an essence source for them was a flaw that made most kingdoms in the Strahl region give up on its use. The ones used on a daily basis were, at most, small scale barriers for important figures.

However, the magic barrier surrounding the castle was clearly at a larger scale. It wasn't as large as the supersized barrier used on the spirit folk village, but it was clearly superior to the standard barriers used in the Strahl region.

I can't tell what kind of barrier it is from here... Let's get within the castle walls first.

After observing enough of the outer city, Rio decided to head inside the capital. It was roughly one hour's walk away. Stopping at street stalls to confirm the state of the capital on the way, he arrived at one of the gates. There, he paid the entry fee and stepped inside the city walls.

The further I move inwards, the higher the standard of living and public safety gets.

That's right—the inside of the walls was clearly a different world from the outside. The standard of living rose closer to the walls outside the city as well, but once inside the walls it was visibly evident that life was better here.

The people walking past had better clothes, spirited expressions, and there were street stalls everywhere, overflowing with liveliness. Furthermore, the buildings were all neat and the city was well maintained, with soldiers patrolling at every turn.

Every city had a difference in living standard between the inside and outside of the walls, but it was rare to see a city that had prioritized the development of the interior city so much.

Nidoll Proxia, the emperor who started as a mercenary...

Survival of the fittest. It was an extremely mercenary-like way of thinking, and it governed the entire country.

Rio approached the castle while observing the city's townscape. He went up to the bounds that the general public was allowed to go and analyzed the castle.

There's definitely an intruder detection effect on this... How annoying. There may be other effects too, but I won't be able to investigate it up close during the day because of the security.

Not even Rio could approach the heavily guarded castle during the day. Especially if Reiss was potentially inside.

For now, let's wait for night to fall.

Rio arranged a suitable inn to stay in and decided to gather a little more information about the Proxia Empire.



Late at night, once the citizens of the capital had fallen asleep...

In the end, Rio hadn't been able to obtain much information. He could choose to spend several more days conducting a thorough investigation, but there was little chance of gaining information with no connections.

In the end, Rio decided to go with the high risk, high return option. He dressed in black and covered his face, then snuck out of his room at the inn through the window to commence his plan. His destination: the imperial castle.

He climbed over several walls within the city walls and proceeded towards the interior of the capital. The city was silent at night—especially in the residential areas—and there was no one to be seen apart from the patrolling soldiers.

From a certain point past the noble area near the castle, the townscape came to an end and was replaced with a wide, stone-tiled square; beyond it was the massive stone wall that surrounded the castle. Rio came to a stop right before the square.

The torches are lit and there are a lot of soldiers patrolling the area. The barrier's also set up to just cover the walls. Should I just go around the castle for now?

The probability was low, but there could be a hole in the barrier somewhere. With that thought in mind, Rio decided to go around the vicinity of the castle first. He'd traverse around on the ground and search for an opening.

However, there were no gaps to be found. It seemed that breaking inside without being detected would be impossible from the ground, at the very least.

This meant his only options left were to break in from the sky or interfere with the barrier. That being said, he wanted to avoid the latter option if he

could. Depending on the type of barrier it was, he could be detected as soon he tried to fiddle with it. In conclusion, he had no choice but to try breaking in from above.

Rio gently rose up in the air. He ascended higher than the barrier and overlooked the castle below.

The top of the barrier is coming apart. Though it may be a trap...

Perhaps the magic essence couldn't reach the top of the barrier, as there was a gap that seemed wide enough to pass through. It was possible the opening was a trap, so it would be better to investigate the nature of the barrier—but that could be the very aim of the trap, putting him at risk of being hit by a counterattack spell.

That being said, there were no other potential openings to be seen. Unless there was a hidden passageway only select people knew of, he wouldn't have overlooked anything either.

It would be too optimistic to hope a new point of entry would conveniently appear at some point in the future, and if the gap in the barrier was a temporary failure, it was possible it would be closed by tomorrow.

Let's try going through it.

Rio hesitated, but eventually decided to weave his way through the gap. He knew there'd be risks from the start and was prepared to conduct a rough investigation if it became necessary to do so. But as long as there was the possibility of someone in the castle knowing Lucius, he couldn't afford to run away like a coward.

Since there were ample numbers of soldiers on guard in the garden, he first descended on the roof before entering the castle. He had to figure out the structure of the castle interior as much as possible.

Thus, Rio entered the castle through a window on a darkened upper floor. Next, he confirmed there was no one inside the room before carefully slipping out into the hallway, wary of any soldiers. However...

There's no one around...? And it doesn't seem like there are any magic detection artifacts either.

There wasn't a single soldier guarding the hallway, which made Rio's eyes widen in surprise.

There were no lights on inside the castle, making it pitch black and eerily quiet. He strained his eyes in the dark, but there was no trace of any magic essence originating from detection spells.

But there are so many soldiers on guard outside... Is this a trap after all?

Rio pondered for a moment, but there was no sign of any commotion outside, so he dismissed it as him simply overthinking things.

However, something felt strangely amiss. The complete lack of patrol almost gave the illusion that the castle was inviting him inside. Rio shook his head, deciding to search the inside of the castle a little more. There were no soldiers to be seen on patrol, but he made sure to walk quietly just in case.

For the record, the imperial castle was formed of several buildings. Rio was currently on the upper floor of the main building, where the throne room, main office, council rooms, and other administrative and military facilities were located.

The main building would normally have the most soldiers present in a royal castle, but there was really no sign of anyone around.

Let's head down to a lower floor for now. If no one's around, I'll go to a different building.

There should be at least one or more residential buildings where the imperial family and castle nobles lived.

If he could sneak into them successfully, he might be able to draw out information from the people there. This time, Rio's goal wasn't to find a soldier, but someone with a certain level of status. People with status tended to be well-connected and were a better source of information.

At the same time, it was possible for such a person to be in the building Rio was currently in, so when he spotted a promising room during his search, he tried to enter it. However, the door was securely locked without any sign of life behind it.

In the end, Rio proceeded onwards and headed downstairs.

From a security perspective, it was common for the entrance to be placed away from the first and second floors, so the main building could only be accessed via bridges on the third floor connected to other buildings.

Rio was able to sneak out of any window and fly over to the other buildings, but he was confirming the structure of the castle right now, so he chose to move on foot. He proceeded forward carefully, blending in with the darkness.

Then, on one of the connecting walkways on the third floor, Rio finally found a soldier. There were a total of five bridges connected to other buildings, four of which were guarded by soldiers. It wasn't a very welcome sight as an intruder, but Rio felt oddly relieved to find soldiers on guard. However, his mind immediately focused on the matter of which building to move to next.

I'll go through all of them, starting with the least-guarded building. I should learn the structure of all of them. That building is strangely large, though...

He decided to start searching the least-guarded building first. The lack of security made it less likely there was anyone there, but even learning the structure of the building could be useful later.

Thus, Rio swiftly and quietly crossed the bridge. What he found at the other end was...

What is this place...? A training ground? No, an arena?

The building had the appearance of a round arena. The roof was an atrium and the interior was dimly lit by moonlight. Rio was currently in the upper seats of the stands, overlooking the weathered grounds below.

Well, I can see why they don't need guards here. Seems like I won't need to check any further either, Rio thought, losing interest and turning to head back to the main building. However—

"Huh?!"

With his heightened senses from using a body enhancing spirit art before sneaking in, Rio detected a faint presence. The owner of the presence immediately closed in on him.

Rio jumped out of the way in a fluster.

“Oh? So you can detect my presence under the cover of darkness. As expected of an intruder capable of slipping through the barrier. I am the emperor, Nidoll Proxia. Welcome, insolent intruder.”

There stood a boulder-like man with a bright smile—who introduced himself as the first emperor of the Proxia Empire.



Rio warily observed the man that appeared out of nowhere from underneath his hood.

“What, have you frozen in fright at the emperor’s reverence? Fine, I’ll allow you to speak. What do you have to say for yourself?” Nidoll Proxia raised both arms and spoke to Rio pompously. He held in his right hand a black broadsword that would normally require both hands to handle.

“How did you know I snuck through the barrier?” Rio asked, concealing his discomposure by deliberately choosing not to acknowledge the man before him as the emperor.

“Bwahaha! On top of hiding your face before the emperor, you speak in such a disrespectful manner... Well, that’s fine. However, I have no reason to explain myself to an intruder.” Nidoll smiled heartily, refusing to answer Rio’s question.

Figures... But that doesn’t matter. Nidoll Proxia... This man is the emperor of this country?

Rio hadn’t expected a proper answer to begin with, but he was dubious about whether this man was really Nidoll Proxia himself.

“If you refuse to reveal your identity, I will have to make you yield by force. Are you ready, lout?” Nidoll said, raising his sword in a natural stance.

At the same time, Rio unsheathed two daggers from his breast pocket without hesitation. He held them in a backwards grip and assumed his battle stance.

“Bwahaha! Whether you’re an assassin, a thief, or someone else... Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m in a great mood right now. As the first intruder to make it

this far inside, I'm willing to give you a reward. If you manage to defeat me, then I shall willingly present you my neck."

No sooner had Nidoll finished his words than he charged at Rio.

So fast!

Rio's eyes widened at Nidoll's physical abilities before he moved forward to meet Nidoll from head-on. Slipping past the broadsword that Nidoll swung lightly, he slashed at Nidoll's thighs while passing him. However, the dagger was easily deflected with a metallic clashing sound.

He's not wearing metal armor. Is it chainmail? No, the resistance just now was more...

Rio gulped quietly.

"Bwahaha! Well done, well done. Do continue to entertain me," Nidoll said, attacking again without giving Rio the time to think. In contrast to his large body, his movements while swinging his broadsword were compact and precise. Each time he swung his sword, the audience seats crumbled away like a biscuit.

However, Rio moved like an acrobat to skillfully evade Nidoll's attacks. He moved freely from left to right, eventually shifting the battlefield from the spectator seats to the field below.

"You're nimbler than expected. Vexed as I am to admit, it seems I'll be at a disadvantage if I challenge you in a test of speed," Nidoll muttered, following Rio down to the arena. The open field made it easier to put his mobility to use, making it simpler to move around there than the audience seats, which had steps and other obstacles.

Immediately following, Rio feinted by dashing to the left and right while charging towards Nidoll.

"Hmph!" Nidoll slammed his broadsword against the ground with all his might. Then, starting from the point of impact, black flames exploded outwards, scattering in front of him.

What are those flames...?



Rio instantly stepped back to widen his distance with the black flames, watching them dubiously.

“Hmm. On top of being nimble, your reactions are quick as well. However, my sword controls the flames of the evil dragon. It won’t be so easy for you to extinguish,” Nidoll hummed in admiration, then brandished his broadsword in a horizontal slash. The black flames radiated out in a straight line, burning the entire field.

“Hmm... Perhaps I should have held back more?” Nidoll muttered in exasperation at the sea of black. “It has been so long since I’ve crossed swords with someone of equal or greater ability, so I wanted to enjoy myself more... What a cowardly dragon indeed.”

No sooner he muttered that, a barrage of wind suddenly shot out from the black flames. The barrage of wind blew away the black flames, nay, it took in the black flames as it attacked Nidoll in a straight line.

“Hmph!” Nidoll suddenly brandished his sword. The blast of wind made contact with his broadsword and applied creaking pressure to his arm, shocking the air around him.

After a while, Nidoll repelled the barrage of flame-carrying wind. The next moment, Rio had snuck right up to Nidoll.

“Splendid!”

Nidoll had an enraptured smile carved onto his face as he reflexively counterattacked. However, the one with the initiative was Rio, who had launched the surprise attack. He had snuck right up to Nidoll, erasing his distance to the broadsword before swinging his daggers left and right with tricky movements as he began to overwhelm his opponent.

Illuminated by the moon, Rio’s daggers glinted several times. He launched accurate slashes at Nidoll’s arms and legs, but...

The cloth armor he’s wearing seems to have some secret to its material. It’s as tough as cutting a demi-dragon’s skin.

Rio’s slashes were functioning more like blunt attacks. Nidoll’s clothes easily

deflected the blades of the daggers. However, it did seem like the damage was building up underneath the clothes. Hits to the vitals were blocked carefully, but it was only a matter of time before he would be rendered immobile.

“Bwahaha, it seems my defeat is coming in only a matter of time. Good, very good. How splendid indeed. I can feel my blood pumping through my veins. Yes, I remember this sensation now.” Despite being backed into a corner, Nidoll laughed loudly without a care in the world. It was as though he loved fighting with every fiber of his being.

Unable to measure the amount of humanity in this man, Rio began to increase his number of attacks somewhat cautiously.

“What’s the matter? This is an opportune chance to come for my head. Come, take this neck in one blow. You’ll only regret it if you try to weaken me first... Ah, it’s already too late.”

Nidoll urged Rio to quickly take his head, but then he suddenly frowned in disappointment. Immediately following, black magic essence violently rose like flames from his body and broadsword.

Rio backed away reflexively, but—

“Unfortunately, time’s up. I cannot hold it back any longer. You should run away quickly,” Nidoll sighed. The violently blowing torrent of black essence gathered around his sword ominously.

That magic essence is bad news.

Rio felt a cold chill down his spine and promptly gathered essence within his body.

“Oh? It seems you intend on exchanging blows with me. Good, good. That way of thinking is truly magnificent.” Nidoll’s eyes widened, showing a glimpse of his astonishment. Then, his mouth twisted with an aggressive grin. During this time, the black essence torrent continued to gather around his broadsword.

“En garde.” Nidoll held his sword pointed at Rio’s eyes, then swung it down slowly, and a tremendous rush of black flames was released. The inside of the arena was covered in pitch black darkness.

However, Rio had gathered a similarly vast amount of magic essence. He raised his hand at the approaching flames without flinching, and white light burst forward from it. The white torrent of light glittered like diamond dust as it rushed straight onwards, colliding with the black flames. Immediately after the collision, blinding light filled the arena and an ice-cold gale blasted through the area.

Nidoll's black flames had been eaten away and were freezing over. Furthermore, Rio had already moved to approach him from behind.

"Hmm... It was a rather sudden ending, but I cannot recall the last time I felt so elated. Well done. I had fun. To keep my word, I will give you your reward. What do you desire? My life?" Nidoll asked simply. Rio's dagger was pointed at his neck.

"I have no particular interest in your life. What I want is information." Rio paused for a brief moment before stating his demand. The reason why he hadn't attacked Nidoll with the intent to kill was because his original goal was to gather information.

The current situation was definitely not what he had expected, but if this man was the country's emperor, then it was all the more convenient for him. There was a high likelihood he would know Lucius.

"Oh? So you wish for my truthful answers to your questions as a reward. Is that it?" Nidoll's eyes widened in surprise.

"That's right," Rio nodded.

"Ha. Fine, then. State your questions. Quickly, before the guards come running." Nidoll smiled in spite of himself and ordered Rio to speak.

"I'm searching for a mercenary named Lucius. If he's from this country, I want you to tell me what you know about him."

"...Bwahahahaha!" Nidoll laughed loudly.

"...What's so funny?" Rio asked with a suspicious look.

"I see. You snuck all the way here in search of that man. An admirable ability to take action, indeed. Heh heh heh."

“So you’re saying you know of him?”

“Indeed, I do. Though he isn’t a citizen of this country.”

“Then what is his relationship to you?”

“I am the ruler of this country, and that man is the head of a renowned mercenary group. It’s not strange for us to have a contract connection,” Nidoll answered boldly and heartily.

“In that case, you must know of a man named Reiss too? The one acting as the ambassador of this country.”

Nidoll’s eyes widened faintly. “Hmm, so you know of Reiss as well. Indeed, I was the one who appointed that man as our ambassador.”

“What is Reiss and Lucius’ relationship?” Rio asked flatly.

“Lucius was once tasked with Reiss’ protection, but I have no interest in the relationships of my retainers. Reiss rarely returns to this country as is. Even when he does return, he disappears without a word shortly after. Well, it seems he’s making various moves forming factions and the like... Hmm. So which is your target, Lucius or Reiss? I will only give you information about one right now, so choose wisely.”

“Do you understand the situation you’re in right now? I’m the one asking the questions.” Rio shifted his hand quietly, pressing the dagger against Nidoll’s throat.

“Now now, boy. I told you the patrols will come running soon. Do you have the time to waste?”

“Then tell me Lucius’ location. If you know where he is, that is.”

“The Paladia Kingdom. The kingdom is constantly in conflict with their neighboring countries, but my country is providing support behind the scenes. It’s a small kingdom to the east. Have you heard of it?”

“I’ve heard the name.”

“Then I’ll keep this short. It was roughly one year ago that his contract ended with me, and he chose the Paladia Kingdom as his new job location. I prepared a letter of recommendation in secret, so he should have a connection to the

royal family. I don't know if he's still working there, but the first prince may know something," Nidoll replied, then gave a small shrug.

"..." Rio fell silent with a pensive look. Nidoll was voluntarily giving him information, but without credible evidence, there was no telling whether his words were true or not. Rio hesitated, wondering whether it was right to leave like this, when—

"Well, it's your choice whether you believe me or not. But what will you do now? I've told you everything I know about his location, so your reward has now been fulfilled. I have no obligation to obey you any further than this, yes? And it seems the patrol is here. Right on time," Nidoll sneered audaciously. Like he said, the passage connecting to the arena was starting to fill with noise.

Staying any longer would indeed be too risky, huh?

Rio furrowed his brow faintly, then decided to retreat.

"Ah, one more thing. If you're leaving, leave through the way you came in. Don't go touching the barrier carelessly. Though it's up to you whether you believe this or not, too," Nidoll added as an afterthought. At the same time, magic essence swelled up within his body. Rio reflexively stepped back to gain his distance, then immediately began running to escape.

What was the deal with that man?

Rio leaped while running, making his way up to the spectator seats. He had an eerie feeling that was difficult to describe in words, making him glance back down at Nidoll.

Nidoll smiled up at Rio boldly.

"There he is!"

"He's fast!"

"There may be others! Protect His Majesty!"

The soldiers scrambled around in a flurry, surrounding Rio with coordinated movements as they commenced their escort of Nidoll. However, Rio ran at a speed faster than they could follow, lightly leaping up to the atrium.

"W-What physical abilities he has..."

“Is he an enchanted sword user?”

The soldiers froze and looked up at Rio in amazement.

Rio looked down at Nidoll one more time before leaping out of the arena, disappearing from the view of the pursuing soldiers.

“H-He jumped?!”

The soldiers were all wide-eyed in shock. Rio took that chance to use his wind spirit arts and ascend rapidly, leaving the barrier through the gap. Meanwhile...

“Don’t be so mad. I merely put on the act that Reiss directed. I made quite the actor, don’t you think?” Nidoll muttered, chuckling heartily to himself.

Chapter 8: Whereabouts of the Amethyst

Meanwhile, as Rio was heading to Paladia Kingdom based on Nidoll's information...

Christina was visiting Galtuuk, the capital of Galarc Kingdom, in order to give her salutations as the new representative of the Restoration. It was also so that she could give an apology and an explanation for Charles' actions in deploying Beltrum's army by the border. She was accompanied by Flora, Hiroaki, and Roanna. Once all the matters had been settled, it was finally time to return to Rodania.

Presently, Christina and her companions were on board an enchanted airship that was flying between two other escort ships.

Christina had been going over some important documents even after boarding the ship, but once she reached a good place to stop, she decided to have a break with Flora. There was no one but them and Vanessa in the room.

"Finally, we can go back," Christina sighed tiredly as she sipped at her tea.

"Yes," Flora replied, similarly tired from their stay.

"Shall we take a break once we return?"

"Yes!" Flora nodded happily.

"We may not be able to take that many days off, but is there anything you want to do during the break?" Christina asked.

"I'm just happy being with you... But how about a dinner party or tea party? Umm, and we can invite Sir Hiroaki and Roanna." After replying with that, Flora watched for Christina's reaction.

"Sure..." Christina nodded apprehensively. She had scolded Hiroaki after his mock battle with Rio for losing control of his Divine Arms and causing a disaster, so he was now completely aware that she wouldn't be easy to deal with. She had tried to develop their relationship by hosting several events, but even if he

attended, his curt attitude was glaringly obvious. On top of that, when Flora tried to tell him the reason why Christina was angered—

“Of course you’d take your sister’s side.”

Was what he had said before distancing himself from his fiancée, Flora, as well. These days, he was always with Roanna instead. His house arrest had been lifted, so he was able to go along to the Galarc Kingdom with them, but even now he had shut himself in another room alone with Roanna.

There was a limit to what could be forgiven, even for a hero. Forgiving an unforgivable act would only warp Hiroaki’s personality, so he had to learn this distinction before he ended up making more and more enemies.

That was the simple truth Christina wanted to tell him.

And yet even something so simple was difficult. She had tried to explain things as carefully as possible, providing real examples, but her words didn’t seem to reach Hiroaki. Perhaps her lecturing was an uninvited nuisance to him. She probably didn’t have the charm to pull it off in the first place.

There’s nothing to be done about that...

Christina sighed listlessly.

“Excuse me.”

The door opened without a knock.

“Insolent fellow! You dare intrude on Princess Christina and Princess Flora?!” Vanessa reflexively flew into a rage, reaching for her sword sheathed at her waist. Bursting into the room of a royal without knocking was more than just a matter of being ill-mannered.

“Yeah, I came in knowing that,” the man who came in said nonchalantly. On top of that, two more people came barging in behind him. The three of them were dressed in black robes with cloth masks, so their faces couldn’t be seen.

“*Augendae Corporis!* Who the hell are you?” Vanessa recited the spell to enhance her physical abilities before drawing her sword and demanding their identities. Christina stood between Flora and the men to protect her.

“No one’s stupid enough to answer that honestly, right?” the man at the front

sneered.

“There should have been knights on board the ship,” Christina said, pushing Flora to stand behind her.

“Everyone we came across on the way has been peacefully sent to their graves. They were a bit too lax, don’t you think? Just because you’re on a ship doesn’t mean there are no enemies.”

The two others behind the man laughed mockingly.

“Princess Christina, Princess Flora. Stay behind me in the corner of the room.” Vanessa held her sword ready with a sharp expression.

“Come, Flora.” Christina immediately grabbed Flora’s hand and brought her to the corner, then made her stand behind her for protection. Vanessa promptly moved herself to the corner to stand as a wall protecting them.

“Ohoho! The standard response to being attacked in a room is to solidify your defenses, after all. Well, someone may notice the commotion if we take too long, so let’s clean this up quickly. Hey.” The man in the front gestured with his chin, and the two behind him split left and right to surround them. The man also drew closer to the girls.

“...”

Vanessa’s wariness increased, swiftly pointing the tip of her sword between the three men in a threat to take down the first one to move, even if it meant putting her own life on the line.

“Ooh, how scary,” the large man said mockingly.

Is the reason why these men haven’t drawn their swords because they’re after the princesses alive, not dead? Vanessa thought to herself, watching the men draw closer without drawing their swords.

“Christina...”

“It’ll be all right. I’ll protect you.” Christina gripped the hand that Flora had nervously clutched around her sleeve.

“Haaah!” The man standing at the front shouted, prompting the three of them to charge at Vanessa at once. She couldn’t deal with all three of their

attacks at once.

“Ngh...” Vanessa adjusted her sword stance with minute movements, then swung her sword horizontally to mow the three of them down at once.

Her aim and timing were both perfect. The first person’s body was severed, the second person’s body got caught in the momentum of the sword and sent the third person crashing alongside him. That was what Vanessa immediately simulated in her head, but—

Clank! An unexpected metal sound could be heard instead.

“What?!” Vanessa gazed in shock. The man who had leaped from the right had drawn his sword and caught the blow of her sword.

“Well, leaping like this would obviously make you swing like that. Unfortunately, we’re rather experienced in these kinds of fights. We’re well-versed in how to handle them,” the man on the right chuckled smugly. With her weapon blocked, there was nothing to stop the other two from leaping at Vanessa.

“Go take a nice long nap with the others.” The large man stabbed the concealed knife he carried into Vanessa’s abdomen. He then twisted his wrist and yanked the knife out by force.

“Guh... Ugh...”

Vanessa fell to her knees, unable to bear the pain.

“There ya go.”

“Gah...!”

The other attacker kicked the side of Vanessa’s face. Her body was sent crashing loudly into the furniture. She must have hit her head, as she fell limp after that.

“*Inpulsa Fluctus!*” Christina held out her hand and recited a spell while the men were distracted. A magic circle glowed, firing a powerful electric shockwave in front of her.

“Urgh!”

“Guh.”

“Wh...”

The men drew their swords and immediately leaped back. However, the electric shock was drawn towards their swords, attacking the men.

“Photon Projectilis!” Christina then fired a consecutive attack of photon bullets at the men as they moved. Several of them made direct hits, blowing the men to the back of the room.

“You stay over there,” Christina ordered Flora, then fearfully approached the fallen men. She held her hand out in front of her, ready to activate a spell at a moment’s notice. However, they were completely slumped over with their eyes closed.

...Are they unconscious? Christina sighed in relief, releasing the tension she had in her hand.

“It’s all right now. Come here. This room is dangerous. We have to check on Vanessa’s condition,” Christina turned back to Flora and ordered, but—

“C-Christina!” The men that should have been unconscious all rose at once and started running.

“Wha...”

The man closest to her grabbed her from behind, while the other two in the room ran at Flora and easily restrained her from both sides.

“Well, well. What a violent princess you are indeed, firing such magic mercilessly,” the man that had captured Christina from behind said with a hint of exasperation.

Christina’s face twisted with detestation. “Of course. I activated the magic without a care for your lives... How did you survive?”

“Unfortunately for you, we’ve all enhanced our physical bodies with enchanted swords. We caught the first blow with our swords and offset the magic essence, then withstood the second shot by enhancing our bodies. Though it still hurt.” The man tightened his hold around Christina’s slender hands.

“Ngh... Unhand me, you lout!” Christina grimaced with pain.

“Nah, I’m afraid I can’t. It’d be a pain if you started attacking us again, so...”

Clack, went a certain sound. It felt like something had been pressed against her neck.



Magic-sealing shackles? Ngh... Christina frowned.

“If you still want to make a racket, we’ll peel off one of your little sister’s darling nails,” the man behind her said.

“Oww...” Flora made a noise of pain.

“Stop that!” Christina said in a panic.

“Hmm? What did you say?” the man behind her asked innocently.

“If you have to tear off a nail, then take mine. I won’t struggle anymore,” Christina replied weakly.

“Haha. How courageous. Our boss would definitely like you.” The man laughed mockingly behind Christina.

“What is your goal? If it’s abduction, then I should be enough...”

So don’t touch Flora, was what Christina left unsaid.

“Indeed. Which means the second princess is useless, so there’s no reason to keep her alive.”

“Wait. If you’re going to kill someone, then kill me...” Christina begged in a fluster.

Flora joined the conversation in a similar panic. “Y-You can’t! If one of us has to die, then I’ll—!”

“Heh! Bwahaha! Rest assured, if we were out to kill either one of you we would have done so already. We simply received a request to gather as many obstacles as possible. We needed the both of you to begin with—everything else was just a little payback for hitting us with magic.”

The man restraining Christina burst into laughter. Just how spiteful was he?

“Ugh, how disgusting...” Christina bit down her lip.

“It’s a relief to see the two of you have such love for each other. Do keep that up once you get to the other side.”

“Are you taking us somewhere?”

“Just to a certain kingdom. However, our plans are rather packed. There’s no

telling what'll happen to you after you're sent to the designated location. Well, then—let's send you on your way. I'm sure someone has taken note of the commotion by now. Come over here."

The man yanked Christina by the arm and strangely dragged her not to the door, but towards Flora in the corner of the room.

"Aah...!"

Christina was shoved at Flora, making her let out a small shriek.

"Christina." Flora hugged her older sister tightly. Meanwhile, the men were pointing their swords at them so they wouldn't move.

"What's the meaning of this...? Weren't you taking us somewhere?"

Were they going to kill them both after all? After their nasty exchange earlier, it was more than possible. Christina felt uneasy at the sense of impending danger.

"Yes, we will. But, as I just said, our plans are a little packed, so there's no telling what happens after you're sent to the designated location. In other words, this," the man said, taking out a red essence crystal from inside his robe. Then, he threw it at Christina and Flora and recited the spell for teleportation sorcery.

"Instans Motus."

Immediately following, the space around the essence crystal warped.

"Huh...?"

They had no idea what had just happened. With blank looks on their faces, Christina and Flora instantly vanished on the spot.

"Let's be on our way before Reiss starts doubting us as well. *Instans Motus*," the man said, taking out another red crystal. He then recited the spell and the three of them vanished together.

"Hey! What was that noise?!"

Having shut himself in a nearby room with Roanna, Hiroaki heard the commotion and showed up immediately afterwards.



In the central northeast of the Strahl region was a small kingdom named Paladia. In a forest on the west side of this kingdom stood Christina and Flora, their dresses clearly unfit for their surroundings. They both looked around nervously at the gloomy forest, Flora stepping closer to her older sister in fear. They were on an enchanted airship just moments ago, so why were they in the forest?

There was no sign of anyone nearby. There was only the sound of the greenery being rustled by the wind, and the cries of wild animals far in the distance.

It was almost like they were dreaming. However, this was no dream: the metal collar around Christina's neck was indication of that.

"...Where are we?" Christina placed a hand against the collar and mumbled in a daze, looking around at the forest.

Epilogue

Several hours after Christina and Flora were sent to the Paladia Forest...

“Mm, I’m tired...”

On this day, Celia had finished teaching her lecture at the Rodania Academy and was walking through the guest house.

Good work today, Celia, Aishia said, guarding her in her spirit form.

Thank you. Let’s go home quickly and eat something yummy.

Okay. Aishia’s voice echoed with a slightly happy tone.

Ah, but I have to drop by the office first. Christina and the others should be returning today. If they’ve arrived already then I should say hello, Celia explained as she headed for the central office inside the guest house. The top nobles and their secretaries had their desks there, and Christina’s desk was also located at the very back alongside her personal office. She used that office often.

However, you could normally find out who was currently where by coming here, so it was possible that news of Christina’s return had already arrived at this office.

But even if she’s back, she’s probably tired. Perhaps she’s already retired for the day, Celia wondered as she knocked on the office door.

Knock, knock.

“That’s odd... Is there no one inside? Come to think of it, we didn’t pass anyone on the way here either.” The lack of reply and presence of anyone else made Celia cock her head. The office shouldn’t have been completely empty until after work hours...

Knock, knock. She tried knocking once more, but there was still no response. With no other choice, Celia opened the door herself.

“Excuse me...”

She peeked inside, but the room was completely silent. There was no one inside. What could this mean? She cocked her head in confusion, when Aishia suddenly materialized beside her.

Celia scolded her in a fluster. “H-Hey, Aishia! You can’t materialize here, even if there’s no one in the room—”

“Step back. There’s a strange presence,” Aishia said, staring at a corner of the room.

“Huh...?” Celia followed her gaze to the same spot.

The distance between them was roughly several meters.

“I suppose there was no sense in hiding after being this close. And as I expected, the one guarding Celia Claire in spirit form was you... I had my hopes up, but it seems I’ve been completely outwitted by that man. What a bother...”

The Proxia Empire ambassador, Reiss, stood there.



Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 13 - Two Amethysts*.

How did you like volume 13? Did the ending keep you on the edge of your seat?! Surely Rio and Aishia can do something about it, right?! At any rate, if you find that you're curious about the continuation, then there's nothing that would make me happier.

There are more suspenseful developments diligently being worked on in volume 14, so please look forward to the release! Now, there are some announcements I'd like to make by using this space!

First, *Seirei Gensouki's* second drama CD edition release has been decided for volume 14! Thanks to everyone's support, the first drama CD (released with volume 12) has sold enough to receive additional printing and make the second CD a reality. In response to everyone's passionate requests, the second CD will have characters that didn't make it into the first CD, so please look forward to the announcement of further details and the release date!

Next, the *Seirei Gensouki* series has now reached 750,000 sales! This was the first time I had heard the specific numbers as well, so I was surprised to hear we're approaching the 1,000,000 mark! This is all thanks to the favor everyone has shown to this series, so I'd like to use this space to offer my gratitude. Thank you very much!

Now, I believe the only way I can repay this debt is by continuing to write an interesting story. That being said, in order to continue writing commercially, the work needs to make great progress, so from now on I'll be working hard towards the goal of 1,000,000 sales and an anime! And so, I ask for everyone to continue supporting *Seirei Gensouki* in the future as well.

Finally, volume 1 of *Seirei Gensouki's* exclusive shop was a great success, so a powered-up volume 2 has been decided! This time it'll be open in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya! For more details, please check Melon Books and HJ Bunko's

homepage, as well as my Twitter or official website!

I'll wrap things up here now. Let's meet again in volume 14!

Early March 2019

Yuri Kitayama

Bonus Short Story

Professor's Homemade Cooking

One day before the banquet in the Galarc Kingdom, at the dining table in the stone house...

"H... How is it?" Celia asked, watching Rio's expression as he sat down across from her. In front of him was a plate of omurice covered in demi-glace sauce, the first bite of which he had just eaten.

"It's very delicious."

"R-Really?!"

"Yes. The chicken rice has properly accounted for the strength of the sauce, and the half-cooked egg is perfect. It tastes even better knowing that you were the one who cooked it, Professor."

"Y-You really think so?"

"Yes," Rio nodded with confidence.

"I-I see... Thank you. It was worth all the practice, then." Celia giggled bashfully.

"You've been learning how to make omurice from Miharuru and Orphia often these days, after all. I'm honored to have the role of taste tester. However, I do have one question..."

"Hm? What is it?"

"You've let me taste test all your other dishes while you were practicing, so why was the omurice the only dish you wouldn't let me taste until today?" Rio asked.

"W-Well, that's because..."

"Because?"

“You said omurice was your favorite food, so...” Celia mumbled quietly.

“Hm?” Rio cocked his head, unable to make out what she’d said.

“O-Omurice is your favorite food, isn’t it? That’s why I only wanted you to eat it once I was sure it tasted good! Because I wanted you to say that it was delicious!” Celia blurted, her cheeks turning red.

Rio was surprised. “S-So that was why... Thank you very much,” he said with a smile.

“Y-Yeah.”

“It’s really delicious. I wouldn’t mind eating it every day. Will you make it again for me?”

“...Sure.” Celia looked down and nodded slowly.

“Hehe.”

A short distance away, several residents of the stone house were warmly watching over the scene at the dining table.



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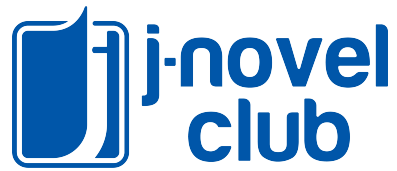
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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 13

by Yuri Kitayama

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